

Who Is Responsible for the Split in the Party  
In reply to the SWP Political Bureau  
by Steve Bloom

The Political Bureau of the SWP, in its statement printed above, claims that it has expelled a disloyal secret faction, which engaged in flagrant acts of indiscipline in violation of the party's organizational principles, and was determined to split from the party. This is completely false. Those labelled "splitters" are not the initiators of a split, but its victims. It is the Barnes leadership of the party which is solely responsible for what has occurred.

The fundamental premise of this frame-up against loyal comrades engineered by the SWP leadership is the charge of secret factionalism. This charge was first levelled against two opposition tendencies in the SWP National Committee at the February-March 1982 NC plenum, and has been raised repeatedly since that time against those who hold minority viewpoints inside the SWP.

But what are the facts? Far from trying to organize secretly, those of us who oppose the political course of the Barnes leadership made repeated attempts to initiate a discussion and present our views to the party as a whole. When the Militant, in November 1981, published the first article by Doug Jenness--which initiated public changes in the party's attitude toward Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution--we proposed a literary discussion inside the party. The majority leadership rejected this proposal.

We submitted platforms and resolutions expressing our point of view to every one of the five NC meetings from February 1982 to August 1983, and repeatedly asked that they be made available to the party membership. The majority leadership consistently voted to keep them secret, limiting circulation to the NC. At the May 1982 NC meeting a motion was passed that the membership could not even be informed of the fact that the two opposition tendencies had formed an Opposition Bloc and submitted its platform (see Bulletin IDOM #3).

When eighteen members openly tried to organize a tendency to participate in the pre-World Congress discussion and presented their platform to the NC in June 1982, the Barnes leadership ordered us to "cease and desist," on pain of expulsion. And when we proposed, in the PC and the NC, to issue the traditional call for the regularly scheduled party convention in the summer of 1983, in order to discuss and decide the disputed questions, the majority leadership of the party, afraid to allow any semblance of open debate before they had expelled us, voted to postpone that convention; and they voted three months later to postpone it a second time.

At every opportunity, we of the opposition attempted to place our views before the party as a whole for consideration. This fact has been well documented through the material published up to now in the Bulletin IDOM, and even more of this material will be published in subsequent issues.

It is hardly credible, given the record, for the Political Bureau to accuse us of attempting to organize a "secret faction." The only reason they can even try to get away with such charges is that they have hidden the real record from the party ranks.

And this is not all they have hidden. In fact, a strong case can be made that it is the Barnes leadership itself--which clearly began to rethink its perspectives on permanent revolution before the 1981 party convention but consistently denied that it was doing so--which is guilty of concealing its views from the party and of organizing behind the back of the party to impose those views without a discussion.

So the charge of "secret factionalism" is completely false. And an investigation of the facts exposes the web of lies which the Political Bureau uses to support that charge. Here we can only cite a few of the more flagrant examples:

1) The PB asserts that the "secret faction" was a single, organized current that included everyone who has at any time in the last few years raised a question about any aspect of party policy; and since this would include diverse elements, representing an array of political views, the PB charges that this opposition constitutes an "unprincipled combination." It is correct that there were, and still are, multiple tendencies and currents which have arisen in the SWP in opposition to the policies of the Barnes leadership. But the idea of a single "secret faction" which included all such tendencies and currents and controlled everything that happened is a fabrication. Once it has been dreamed up, the PB can easily assert that this non-existent faction was an unprincipled combination.

The majority leadership itself has consistently prohibited any organized expression of these tendencies and currents since the 1981 convention (except at the NC level for a limited period). Because of this some opposition to official policies has, as would be expected, become manifest in a dispersed and uncoordinated way, even occasionally revealing significant disorientation on the part of individual members. But whenever any organized opposition attempted to express itself, either in the NC or in the party as a whole, it always presented a clear and coherent political platform.

2) The PB declares that there was a conscious "split operation" for which the four suspended NC members are responsible. But here again, the prohibition against any "organized tendency activity of any kind" which was imposed explicitly on the four (and implicitly on all other members of the party) in March 1982 made it impossible for the NC members or anyone else to function effectively as a leadership for the opposition. Under such circumstances we can hardly be held responsible for what occurred.

If there has been a problem with the maintenance of party norms then the real responsibility for this rests squarely with the Barnes leadership--which is itself guilty of violating the most basic norms of leadership functioning by introducing its programmatic changes without allowing the membership to discuss them. It is not at all surprising, given these open revisions, and given the prohibition on discussion and other violations of democratic norms by the central party leadership, that resistance developed within the ranks --finding different expressions in different party branches. Indeed, it would have been surprising if this had not occurred. No conspiracy theories are necessary to explain what has been happening in the SWP.

3) Connected to the last point is the charge that there were "flagrant violations of party discipline" by those who have been expelled. This is allegedly the form that the "split actions" took.

It is, of course, impossible here to go into the dozens of cases of frame-up charges brought against oppositionists. But the record of this scandalous purge operation (not "split operation") exists. Some of that record has already been made known, and more of it will be.

Those who disagree with the party leadership were expelled on such charges as "boycotting party activity" despite the fact that in many cases they were far more active in their branches than others who were not expelled; those who were allowed to remain in the party had raised no question about the political course of the leadership. Dianne Feeley, who repeatedly but unsuccessfully tried to meet with the Pittsburgh branch leadership to discuss the event she was helping to organize for International Women's Day in 1983--an event that was hailed in the Militant as exemplary--was expelled for failure to function in collaboration with her branch.

Ann Menasche of San Francisco was expelled for "unauthorized" distribution of a poem which she had written, at a memorial meeting for Anne Chester organized by the party (she gave it out to some friends who requested copies). Anne Teasdale Zukowski was ousted from the Iron Range branch because she answered a question asked by a member of the YSA. James Kutcher was harassed and ultimately expelled from the party in Manhattan in a series of events which began with an alleged incident of "violence" by him, even though the "victim" of this supposed violence denied from the outset that it ever took place. The party leadership insisted that Kutcher was guilty anyway.

This list could go on, but it is clear to any objective observer that the central leadership of the party, in order to avoid a discussion of its programmatic revisions, has been making a concerted effort to rid the organization of those who might question or resist the new line. Organizational pretexts have been found to justify this political purge, so that members who do not want to confront the reality of what is going on can find excuses and rationalizations; but the mere assertion in the PB report of "flagrant violations of discipline" cannot hide the ugly truth.

4) The PB repeats the charge used as a justification for the suspension (in reality a de-facto expulsion) of the four opposition NC members in August 1983, that we insisted "on keeping our platform differences secret" and "refus(ed) to inform the National Committee of the differences among" ourselves. The fact is, however, and we explained this clearly to the NC at the time (see our statement on page 40), that we had no new differences in the area of basic programmatic issues or platform, but that we did find ourselves unable to agree about how to pursue the inner-party struggle for the platform we had agreed on when the Bloc was formed in May.

The Opposition Bloc--which was in fact a bloc of two different tendencies in the NC and not a unified faction despite the claims of the Barnes leadership--had been able to come together in anticipation of the opening of the pre-convention discussion. With a prospect of the entire membership becoming active participants in the discussion, the two NC tendencies were able to agree on a common course of action to pursue the fight for the major programmatic positions we shared. But with the postponement of the convention at the May NC plenum, and the anticipated further postponement at the August plenum, the original

differences which had been the basis before May for two separate tendencies in the NC re-emerged. And this, in turn, necessitated the dissolution of the Bloc and the resumption of independent activity by those separate tendencies in their own names.

It should not be surprising, in such circumstances, that "each wing blamed the disintegration on the other, in identical terms," as the Political Bureau statement puts it. But this is hardly proof of "secret factionalism" or attempts to "keep our differences secret from the party." The differences between the two tendencies were well known to every member of the party leadership, and the charges that were raised against us to justify our suspension were simply a smokescreen.

The alleged basis for the recent mass purge--that comrades wouldn't agree to repudiate others and characterize them as disloyal on orders from the PC--is likewise a pretext, and a rather flimsy one at that. The statement that members were required to endorse in order to remain in the party was deliberately worded so as to require agreement with a finding of fact about what occurred at the California state convention, and with a political characterization of the actions taken by the minority delegates as disloyal to the party. This wording was quite deliberate. The party leadership was well aware that any self-respecting revolutionary would find it repugnant to accept such a demand for repudiation without documentary evidence of what actually took place in California, and without access to explanations, by the specific comrades involved, of why they took the action that they did. (As the article by Evelyn Sell in this issue of the Bulletin IDOM points out, the charges of "disloyalty" and "split actions" against the minority in California have no basis.) The fact that the overwhelming majority of those interrogated refused to repudiate under such circumstances is, again, hardly proof of the existence of a secret faction.

The PB states that "the Political Committee has carried through what amounts to a re-registration of the party membership." That contention is utterly false. A re-registration is universal. It applies to all, and requires an affirmation by every member in order to remain in the organization. The Barnes leadership did not demand statements from all the members--but only from some of them (those who were on a confidential list in the National Office). The reason for their selectivity is obvious. They knew that not only oppositionists and dissidents would refuse to make repudiations under these circumstances, but also many of the Barnes leadership's supporters would have trouble acceding to such a demand. That was why they carefully confined their interrogations and demands for repudiation to members who have raised, or might raise political questions: "The Political Committee had decided to bring charges of disloyalty against comrades who by their own actions in their branches had identified themselves as part of the secret faction splitting operation."

This statement by the Political Bureau is the clearest proof of the political nature of these expulsions. There was no evidence of misconduct against those who were the victims of the recent purge, not even the dubious sort of evidence that had been invoked in previous expulsions. The party leadership itself had prohibited rank and file members from formally affiliating to any organized tendency or grouping, so it cannot be on the basis of any such affiliation that they deter-

mined who had "identified themselves." The "actions in their branches" which made members targets of the PC were the expression of political views at variance with those of the leadership. This is, in fact, the only "evidence" that can be produced of a secret faction--that comrades in various parts of the country shared a similar commitment to the traditional revolutionary Marxist program of the SWP, and insisted that the changes in that program being made publicly by the party leadership be presented to the organization as a whole for discussion and decision.

A leadership that was truly confident in itself and its ideas would welcome such a debate, and organize the discussion--rather than expelling its political opponents. That would be the way a Bolshevik leadership would solve the current problems faced by our party. Even now, if the Barnes leadership would agree to a truly democratic discussion with its opponents it would find that there are no longer any problems--either real or imaginary--with "secret factions" or "splitters."

There is one particularly striking aspect to the methodology which has been employed during this frame-up campaign. An event occurs (for example, the Opposition Bloc dissolves, or the minority reporter to the California state convention makes a statement). The majority leadership then unilaterally interprets that event, and draws conclusions about it (that there must be fundamental programmatic differences in the Bloc which are not being expressed, or the entire delegation to the state convention is involved in a "split operation").

The leadership does not treat these speculations as hypotheses, which need to be tested and proven, but as absolute and incontrovertible facts. They then act on the basis of their own opinion about what "must be true," and consistently reject without consideration possible alternative interpretations of events. They reject facts that don't fit in and refuse to discover or acknowledge anything that might contradict their particular interpretation. (For example, when the NC was suspending the four opposition members, a motion was made by the four to establish a commission to investigate the actual facts before action was taken. This was voted down, and the NC acted solely on the basis of the false assertions made by the Barnes leadership. In California, the State Committee held its trials in secret session and refused to hear statements by the accused.)

Any questions that may be asked by the leadership in its "investigation" under such circumstances only make sense, and can only be answered if the particular conclusions and interpretations of the leadership are accepted as valid: "What were the programmatic differences that caused you to dissolve?" Or "will you repudiate the disloyal split actions?" When these questions cannot be accepted by members who do not share the leadership's assumptions, or who know for a fact that they are false (that there were no "programmatic differences" or "disloyal split actions") then the failure to respond as required is cited as proof that these comrades are part of a disloyal secret faction, "refusing to cooperate with elected party bodies" and "hiding their views from the party."

And of course only the leadership's version of events and the leadership's conclusions are presented to the party ranks--since those who could present a different interpretation are now expelled. Even if party members may have questions about the official version, they have no access to the information necessary to determine the real truth for themselves.

The timing of this purge, coming just a few months before the scheduled opening of our twice-postponed pre-convention discussion, underlines the obvious fact that the current party leadership fears most of all a full and democratic discussion of the big theoretical and programmatic questions they have put on the agenda. The PB declares that the split in the party has been consummated, but this is a bad case of self-deception. Any Leninist will understand that no split can be really consummated without the essential precondition of a full political discussion and clarification. Attempts such as those being made by the Barnes leadership to substitute organizational measures for the requisite political debate can only lead to the most destructive consequences.

In the long run, the present SWP leadership will not be able to avoid that debate, no matter how many expulsions they carry out. It will be imposed on them by life--by the reality of the class struggle itself. And even if they pretend to ignore those of us who have been expelled--who will not go away, and will continue to remind the party of its true heritage--they will find that new opposition, questions and discussion will inevitably arise from those who remain inside the party as the membership confronts the contradiction between the new line of the leadership and the political realities they see and experience in the world.

The SWP leadership may even find that the very action they are counting on to end their problems and finish the "split"--the latest purge--will itself serve as a stimulus for other members to begin to wonder about what is happening in the SWP today. Some of these will take up a serious investigation of the vital programmatic and theoretical questions, and find for themselves what is being done to our heritage. They, too, will take action to oppose the leadership's present course.

This purge is, of course, an attack on the democratic rights of the oppositionists who were expelled. But even more than that it is an attack on and partial foreclosure of the democratic rights of all party members. As such it is a threat to the life-blood of the party. The continuation of this attack will mean the death of the SWP as a revolutionary organization. We urge all comrades to act to reverse this process before it is too late. Rescind the expulsions! Open the discussion! Solve these problems in a Leninist, and not in a bureaucratic fashion!