

A Leninist Vanguard Party Dying in a Foreign Land: 1956: The Fading Revolution

IT WAS OCTOBER 23, 1956. I was driving home from work along the East Shore Freeway of San Francisco Bay. The voice of a foreign correspondent came from my car radio with a report from Hungary via Paris. He announced that thousands of chanting high school and university students had taken over a radio station in Budapest. He told of how the head of the Hungarian Writers Union had climbed atop a statue in a Budapest square to tell 50,000 demonstrators that their revolution would fail without the full support of industrial workers.¹

For his humorous closing the correspondent chuckled as he told a human interest story phoned to him earlier by an Austrian correspondent. The workers at a Budapest bicycle factory had met during their lunch hour and voted to join the general strike that was just beginning. But they also voted not to cease working until every one of them had a bicycle on which to make the trip home.²

Laughter burst from me. As Slim Highspar, my friend from Maud, Oklahoma and the East Oakland Chevrolet plant would have said, if I'd have died right then it would have taken the undertaker three days to get the grin off my face. I settled back down only because I allowed my imagination to intrude with a vision of how the same event might have taken place in a factory where I knew all the faces:

I could see a bunch of us standing there in a line after we had completed that special day's production quota determined by our own headcount. Each of us was waiting his turn to be handed one of the bikes carefully wheeled up by a dozen or so of the people who worked at the end of the assembly line. The jobs on the Trim or Finish line were among the hardest in the plant, but on this day the people there were all smiles, joking that we—meaning all of us who didn't work in Trim—now had no excuse for not attending the shop meeting early the next morning. One of them yelled, "We're staying all night so come back early."

When we got outside our yelling made it hard for some of us to mount up. We cheered as others rode off

whooping and bouncing like cowboys. Our hilarity was our triumph over the worst of human experience, submission.

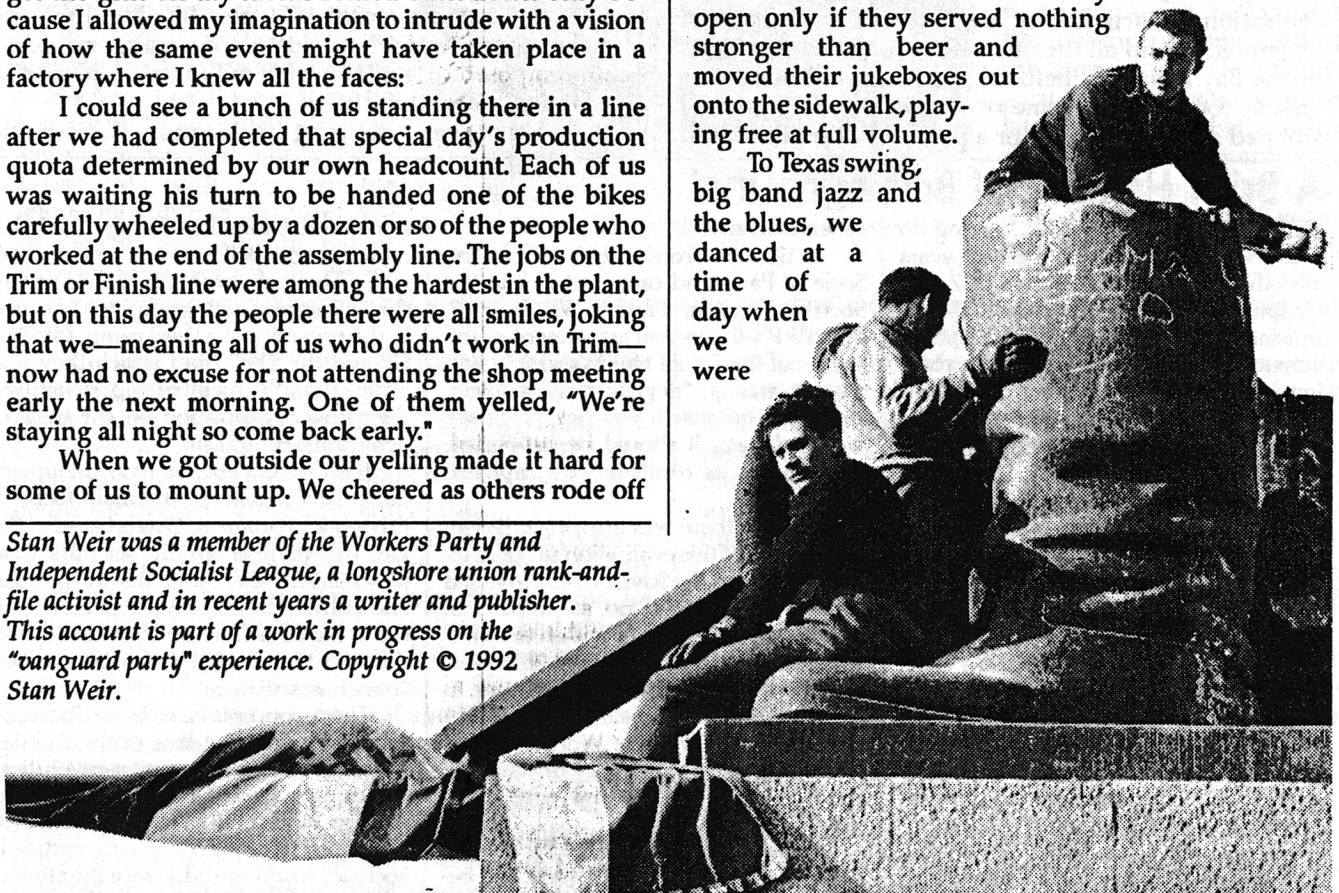
I could see how my own assembly line partner and I might have stood there looking at one another in the parking lot, handlebars in hand, one about to head toward South Central, the other for East L.A. My imagination became cinematic: *We look back at the plant still hating it, but liking it too, for the first time.*

From Oakland to Budapest

I had to cut back to making an assessment of what I had learned from the newscast. It had to be that what was happening in Hungary was a revolution. The report of what happened at the bicycle factory could not have been an isolated incident. By more than their decision to strike, the so-called common people were breaking with the rules of what had until yesterday been seen as the guidelines of acceptable behavior—for them, and back to their grandparents.

It had been that way on a smaller scale during the 54-hour Oakland general strike which began on December 3, 1946. The first three hours of the strike were a time of carnival. We allowed bars to stay open only if they served nothing stronger than beer and moved their jukeboxes out onto the sidewalk, playing free at full volume.

To Texas swing, big band jazz and the blues, we danced at a time of day when we were



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This account is part of a work in progress on the "vanguard party" experience. Copyright © 1992 Stan Weir.

Fighters in the 1956 Hungarian revolution, the beginning of the end of Stalinism and an inspiration for hopes of workers' power East and West.

supposed to be punching in. That by itself was an ecstasy. I looked across the crowd and saw the first person I knew from where I worked. It was Bill Kuzyn of our receiving dock. He was doing the jitterbug waltz, dips and all, with a woman who was about a foot taller than he if you counted her hairdo. They were good. His head was on her shoulder, eyes half closed, but he wasn't missing a step. It was necessary for her to lead and she did it with grace, returning the smiles of all the couples moving around them to the same beat.

Only after documenting our defiance with music and fun did we get to the business of sealing off the downtown area before the police began to make their move to take back the streets. The Oakland general strike lasted fifty-four hours. No big time union officials showed themselves during the first day.

What we did during those twenty-four hours was of course a little radical. We who danced and were holding block meetings all over the heart of downtown Oakland were, for that time, the government-in-the-streets. You could get out of town without a union card, but not in. They had to be doing the same kinds of things right then in Hungary, and then much more.

My car had reached familiar streets and forced me back to making a mental list of the practical things that now had to be done. The Communist Party people would be supporting the invasion of Hungary by the Soviet armored divisions. What I had just heard on the radio demanded that there be a quickly organized concentration of activity by the Independent Socialist League (ISL) and all the other non-Communist radicals in the Bay Area. But before I got home and began the task of coordinating some of that activity by phone, I stopped at a liquor store for a pack of Pall Malls and lit

up my first cigarette in two years.

Rallying for the Revolution

Max Shachtman, the National Secretary and leading member of the ISL,³ was en route to the West Coast. It was three weeks after the Hungarian Revolution broke into the open on October 23, 1956. He was scheduled to arrive at the Oakland airport near midnight to begin the last leg of his national tour protesting the military occupation of Hungary.

There were four of us in the car headed for the airport. Barney rode up front, a quiet man of genuine humility, the person in the branch most sensitive to the individual needs of others. He was highly respected, no matter that he didn't make his living as an industrial worker. Charles sat between us, one of several natural writers who—in our generation—became silent after joining the movement, and who remained a leader by making his energies available to others in need.

Arlene was stretched out in the back seat in order to get a nap before working the late shift in an all night downtown eatery. She and I had both had some college but were among the few branch members who had only high school diplomas. For years she had been a union activist in an auto assembly plant, but was now a waitress who could swish among tables with four full plates on each arm.

Like her, I had recently been caught in a mass layoff from an auto plant. My new job painting freeway overpasses and bridges meant that, also like her, I was no longer a member of what had once been a special party elite composed of "rank-and-file militants" employed in the nation's largest industry.

But that was now long in the past. The capable

A Brief Historical Background

TROTSKYISM CAME INTO being in countries around the world eleven years after the Russian Revolution of 1917. The Communist Party leaders ordered the expulsion of James P. Cannon, Max Shachtman and Martin Abern in 1928, for reading a document, written by Leon Trotsky, which had been banned by the Kremlin leadership and obtained by Cannon shortly thereafter.

Cannon, Shachtman and Abern had all been Communist party officials. These "three generals without an army," a label initially hung on them by the party, were given public forum especially by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Italian anarchists then led by Carlo Tresca. A series of public meetings were held in New York under their protection. The Communist Party members sent to break up the meetings were made to sit and listen. From among their number were recruited the members of the first Trotskyist party, or CLA (Communist League of America, Left Opposition), from which a Fourth International organization was built in twenty-three

other countries.

In 1936 the Trotskyists went into the Socialist Party and came out of it as the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) in 1938. The SWP's theoretical assessment of the nature of the Soviet Union's society was that it was a "degenerated workers' state," but because it was nevertheless a workers' state, it should be supported, critically, in its conflicts with capitalist nations.

By 1939, there was growing criticism in the party of this evaluation authored by Trotsky. When the Soviet Union invaded Finland and Poland on an imperialist basis in 1940, a minority within the SWP who believed in the necessity of the formation of a third socialist alternative to Communism and social democratism split away to form the Workers' Party (WP). The move was led by Shachtman, Abern, James Burnham and James Johnson (C.L.R. James).

A majority of the WP led by Shachtman held that the Soviet Union had become bureaucratic collectivist, a new form of system. James, Raya Dunayev-

skaya and Grace Lee Boggs headed a minority who believed it to be state capitalist. The two evaluations had many similarities and both groupings believed in the necessity of a third camp. Like the CP and the SWP from which they had come, the WP membership structured their new organization on the basis of democratic centralism.

It is this concept and its two companion beliefs which are the main focus of this work in progress. One is based in the idea that there is but one scientific road to socialism; the other denies political and cultural autonomy to member parties of the CP's Third and the Trotskyists' Fourth International. It has been called "franchise socialism."⁴

These concepts have been discussed at great length in terms of the Russian revolutionary and counter-revolutionary experience and culture, but seldom on the basis of the experience of the people in Leninist vanguard parties in societies world round, hence the attempt which begins here.

—S.W.

people who had built the Workers' Party's auto fraction in the industrial midwest had become UAW staffers. They had lost their identity as radicals. It was all accomplished with the guidance of the Shachtmanite leadership who, in the same process, had helped the new career staffers hide their radical past from public view.

Most of the men and women who had recruited our generation to socialism from 1935 to 1945 had disappeared from sight. Probably the largest number of "ex's" had become part of the independent radical community doing what they could as individuals. But none had found an organization in which they could work for societal change on more than a single issue basis. Enough! The airport turn from East 14th Street was two blocks ahead.

We found Max in the baggage claim area. He seemed in good spirits despite the news that total defeat of the revolution was now held off only by the refusal of factory workers to end their general strike. His mood changed abruptly when he sensed a stiffness in us. We had already worked out an agreement among ourselves that we wouldn't let him tweak the cheek of any one of us. It was a thing he was apt to do compulsively when among party people who had disagreements with him, but for whom he still had affection. We all greeted him warmly, but at three-quarter arm length. He realized we were disciplining him before the fact and went quiet.

During the drive back to North Oakland he slouched into a sleeping position and conversation ceased among the members of our greeting committee. I dropped off Arlene, Nash and then Barry with good-nights and an exchange of reminders on the assignments for the next three days and nights.

The following day I got home from work to learn from Mary that Max had not come out into the main part of the house since breakfast. Yet, at supper time he appeared at the table fresh from a shower and able to scare and then charm our two small daughters by reading to them from Dr. Seuss' *The Cat In The Hat* at near shout volume. We ate a light meal and left for the meeting as soon as the babysitter arrived.

There was already a capacity crowd in Stiles Hall just across the street from the university campus. Our choice of this location for Max's main public meeting in the Bay Area was made not only because he had requested it. Most of the industrial workers who had joined our ranks during the war had quit.

Barney was already in position just inside the front door of Stiles taking a running head count. He explained that over three hundred people were already seated, or about four times the number we had been getting at our larger public meetings since 1950. "For just over half of them," he added, "this is their first attendance at one of our meetings." A closer look revealed

that they were mainly students and people of young faculty age from the more permanent part of the university community.

I talked with other members and friends before going to the podium to greet the audience and introduce the subject and speaker. The people seated in the rows before us quieted without being asked. Shachtman felt their anticipation. He greeted them in that kind of personal and political recognition of their presence that makes it possible for the people of an audience to identify with history and to feel their individual identities.

Then, beginning in measured low tones, he laid out the historical background of the current events in Hungary. A little over an hour later he went to his conclusions making statements like:

"Any attempt at the creation of a collectivized economy without a simultaneous widening of democracy has

to generate radical opposition from the working and middle classes, and especially from their young.

"The rejection of what the Communist bureaucracy has to offer, if this revolution is victorious, does not mean that the people making the revolution will seek capitalism as an alternative. History allows them but one option, and that is to democratize their entire society and along with it the form of collectivism they themselves have experienced.

"Win or lose in the immediate struggle, theirs is a major contribution to the eventual dismantling of Stalinist totalitarianism."

The analysis of the Hungarian revolution that Shachtman had provided during his speech and in responses to statements and questions from the floor was probably more comprehensive than any the audience had heard from media experts. Their applause and generosity during the collection and when buying from our literature table acknowledged their appreciation.

Still, I had the feeling that they were leaving with less than they had anticipated. I couldn't be sure. I may have fallen into that easy belief that their reactions were



James P. Cannon, Martin Abern and Max Shachtman in New York City, 1938.

the same as mine. Nevertheless I remained uneasy.

We had waited for years. The 1953 uprising in East Berlin led by building trades and steelworkers created a crack in the Soviet empire. The Hungarian revolution had created a real break; and Shachtman hadn't put forth ideas about how the changes brought by it might become a creative stimulant in the lives of Americans in the present. I wasn't thinking of barricades, but rather an end to the deadening boredom of the political activities we had for too long been performing.

A comprehension I didn't want began to break in on me. When Trotsky's predictions of the disintegration of Stalinism at the end of World War II and consequent revolutionary developments in Europe failed to come true, we were incapable of building a creatively radical way of life around what was for us the new reality. Actually, we were not geared for much less than a period directly preliminary to "the final conflict" we still sang about at party conventions.

Looking Back

At that moment I couldn't allow myself to go any further with such thoughts. The hall had to be cleared or we'd have to pay an extra rental fee. The chairs had to be stacked, the ashtrays emptied and the floors swept. After cleanup a dozen of us took Max to a cafe with big booths and bad coffee. It was past midnight when Mary and I got him back to our house. She checked our children and went to bed. I took the babysitter home.

Max was waiting for me when I returned. Neither of us was ready to attempt sleep. We went to the kitchen and I pulled out the chilled vodka. He felt good and wanted to recap the successes of the evening. I did too. He complimented me on the collection speech I had made.

"Jesus, Red, it was nothing like the usual grinding appeals we have been making for so many years. You didn't badger them, just cheerfully gave them an opportunity to help. It was your optimism. And I want to say something about that. I don't want to dampen that in any way, Red, but you may be expecting too much from the Hungarian events. The revolution there is probably going to be put down. Who knows when another will come along? It probably won't have great effect on our lives for years."

"I think you may be right about the defeat, for now, in Hungary, Max. But this revolution right now, win or lose, eliminates the credibility of the kinds of things that Irving Howe and other doomsayers have been putting out since Communism came to power in Czechoslovakia in 1948. For them, because Russian Communism could come to power without the immediate assistance of the Soviet Army it meant that entire workforces in countries around the globe could be won to Stalinism on a popular basis even though they were aware of its totalitarian character.

"During the last three weeks we have learned that in addition to conducting the longest general strike in history, in every industrial city and town in Hungary workers with leaders developed from their own number have formed factory councils. This means that in revo-

lutions or attempted revolutions against both capitalist and bureaucratic collectivist or state capitalist systems, by the very nature of their work lives people use the same organizational methods. This is important stuff, Max, reaffirmation of ideas that were once thought to apply only in revolutions against capitalism.

"Look at the example Hungary provides even in defeat. The general strike has again revealed that it automatically poses the necessity for the participants to create alternative economic and governmental forms or accept defeat. It's not happening in America, but it is happening. Factory councils can become the foundation of those alternative forms. This revolution has demonstrated that people rebelling against both existing systems can invent the same alternatives, whether in California or Central Europe. And, this again asserts the third camp idea we pushed for so well during the war."

"Come on, Red," he said drawing out my name, "let me up off the deck, will you?"

It was true, I had begun to get into the making of a full blown speech. I was hitting home, but the lateness of the hour alone meant my timing was not the best. If I continued I would again in one way or another soon be calling Max a social democratic renegade. We had all eased up on one other during the last few years. People in a lifeboat and bailing don't take time out to fight. There was a sense of camaraderie between us that might not have developed if times had been better.

"Okay Max, if you'll help me down off this soap box I'll pour us another drink." It was a postponement, but with a change in perception. What I was beginning to admit to myself was that Max and the majority were seeking a different kind of rescue from the Leninist and Trotskyist experiments than the rest of us. At the same time I would have found it hard to believe that he already had plans to dissolve the ISL.⁵

Fishing With the Old Man

The vodka was cold on the throat but warm to the head. Max had changed the direction of the conversation and saw that I wasn't going to stop him. He was about to tell an insider story about the early days of our movement.

"Jim, Marty⁶ and I were the first members of the Communist Party to be expelled for Trotskyism. The charge: we had read a document written by Trotsky. Ready or not, this instantly made us Trotskyist leaders. Within a few years we would recruit a membership of several thousands, mainly from the ranks of the Communist Party itself, and help develop a new international movement in twenty-three countries. But all that was still in the future. For a time the three of us were the only known Trotskyists around, 'three generals without an army' was the tag someone hung on us and none of us had met or even laid eyes on Trotsky from a distance.

"Stalin had exiled Trotsky in 1927, and three years later he and his wife, Natalia, were living in Prinkipo, Turkey under partial house arrest. Because I spoke Russian and had translated some of his works, I was chosen to initiate a working relationship with the old

man.

"First of all, I developed a formal correspondence with him. With that done, it was agreed that I would go to Prinkipo so that we could collaborate on plans for rebuilding an international and socialist movement.

"As I recall, the first steamer I got took me to Rotterdam. After a long layover I got another that landed in a central Mediterranean port. Then, again after a wait of several weeks, I got a berth on a Turkish ship that was homeward bound. Finally, after two months in route, I arrived in front of Trotsky's house at two in the morning. I paid the cab driver and knocked on the door and the old man himself appeared at the door in a white flannel nightgown and tasseled nightcap. Somehow I muttered my identity.

"Oh, Shachtman, yes, we have expected you. You sleep in there. We go fishing in the morning. Goodnight. Rest well.

"With that, Trotsky returned to the bedroom he shared with Natalia. I dragged my bag down a short hallway to the small bedroom. There was a candle and matches. I undressed, relieved myself in a chamber pot as old as Constantine the Third, turned back the blankets and crawled in."

(I laughed to myself as Max told the story. He was the most citified person I had ever met. I had joked that he had been born on the subway train with a copy of the *New York Times* as his first diaper.)

"Four hours later Trotsky was pounding on my door. 'Shachtman, fishing!'

"No need for him to yell, I was not asleep. There was no way out but to get back into my three piece suit from Klein's. Trotsky and the live-in guard the Turkish government had assigned to him were standing just outside the front door. They began to walk away from the house as soon as they saw I was up. No juice and no coffee. I figured that we must be going to eat breakfast after fishing. I found it impossible to run and catch up to them.

"The path down to the water was dark. I could only stumble along behind. They had their rowboat in the water by the time I got there. I sat in the rear, Trotsky was in the middle and the guard pushed off from the bow. The fishermen rowed together, each with his own oar, not saying a damned word.

"Half an hour later we arrived at a small island composed entirely of stones about the size of a human head. The boat was made fast and they filled it with the stones, the guard passing them to Trotsky who piled them so that the weight was always equalized for the sake of stability. The loading continued until the boat was full. My legs were sticking straight out on top of the stones. The guard shoved us off again and jumped into the bow where he stayed while Trotsky alone rowed us out into deep water with great care.

"The boat had only few inches of ... yes, thank you, free-board. If it rocked only a few inches from side to side we would take in water. I sat there motionless. Trotsky had all but stopped rowing. The guard began to play a large net out into the water. Trotsky kept the boat moving in a wide circle until the net surrounded us.

Then they each took an end of the net and heaved. As the circle closed around us, I began to see that it was full of jumping fish.

"With the first break through of morning light, suddenly, Trotsky stood straight up in the middle of the boat. And then, after a minute he began to hurtle stone after stone straight down on the fish. As the poor dead or stunned creatures floated to the surface the guard leaned over, pulled them out by their tails and put them in the spaces made empty by the stone thrower.

"Jesus, Red, I was sitting there in the back of the boat with the old man throwing and I guess I was almost in shock. The old man finally noticed. He didn't stop with the stones, but looked straight at me and yelled, 'Your President Hoover, he can catch fish like this, hah?'

"I thought to myself, 'Yes, but at least he's a god-damned sportsman, uses a pole, a line and a hook.'"

The instant Shachtman finished a sentence burst from me like a shot, "Max, look at the difference in cultures!" □

Notes

1. Research in the documentation of this series of revolutionary events reveals that Peter Veres, Chair of the Hungarian Writers' Union said: "In this revolutionary situation we shall not be able to acquit ourselves well unless the entire Hungarian working people rally as a disciplined camp. The leaders of the party and state have so far failed to present a workable program We Hungarian writers have formulated in seven points the demands of the Hungarian Revolution." *The Revolt in Hungary: Documentary Chronology of Events, October 23, 1956-November 4, 1956*, Free Europe Committee, New York, 1957, 6.

2. The correspondent did not identify this factory by name or location. My hunch is that it was, and possibly still is, located in the large industrial complex on the island of Csepel in the Danube between Buda and Pest. Nowhere in Eastern Europe in the period immediately after World War II did a major concentration of industrial workers appear to embrace Communism with more enthusiasm than at what the Kremlin leaders called "Red Csepel." And, in no other place was its rejection more profound. Any information that would help make identification of the bicycle factory exact would be deeply appreciated.

3. Reminder: The original name of the ISL was the Workers' Party. We changed the name to the Independent Socialist League (ISL) to call public attention to our belief that it was no longer possible for us to jump from our present condition to that of a mass party in a brief time.

4. Members of the Communist Party expelled during its convention last December, and members of the Northern California section, who seceded from the national party, are to be credited with bringing this clarifying term into public discussion. My first exposure to the term comes from Ringo Hallinan: "I'm opposed to democratic centralism. I'm opposed to the idea that we've got...the scientific answer...the CP's franchise approach to revolution...." See *The Express*, an East San Francisco Bay Area weekly, March 30, 1992 cover story.

5. Early in 1957, the ISL's leadership proposed that unity be probed with the Socialist Party then led by Norman Thomas. The SP would not agree to merger and offered that ISL members could become SP members only as individuals to be phased in a branch at a time. The people around Shachtman and Michael Harrington led in the move for acceptance of the terms. Most were able to make the changeover.

6. Nicknames of James P. Cannon and Martin Abern. After the 1940 split the Workers' Party was headed by Shachtman, Cannon continued as the leader of the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) and the Fourth International. Abern, who did very little writing for publication, almost alone did the foundational correspondence that developed the new or Fourth International in twenty-three countries. For several years after the split he worked closely with the largest of the political minority factions in the WP, the James Johnson-Freddie Forrest-Ria Stone tendency ("Johnsonites") led by C.L.R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs, but he remained in the WP when the tendency re-entered the SWP in 1948.