

Ernest Mandel vs. the Spartacist League: A Dismal Symmetry

Reprinted below is the text of a leaflet distributed at the 11 November 1994 debate in New York City between Ernest Mandel of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USec) and Joseph Seymour of the Spartacist League/U.S. (SL). The event drew 400 people, a fair size for a left meeting in New York these days, but it nonetheless proved a disappointment for almost everyone in attendance.

Comrade Mandel appeared tired and in poor physical health. His demeanor suggested that he was participating under protest. His rambling presentation was short on program, but full of generalities about the international class struggle and the necessity to wield mass influence if one aspires to change history. He floated the notion that the current global situation was one of deadlock in which neither the working class nor the bourgeoisie is able to deliver decisive blows. Several speakers from the floor pointed out that this dovetails neatly with the USec's ongoing dissolution into the social-democratic/broad left swamp. One of the few direct polemical attacks that Mandel made against the SL was the ludicrous assertion that defending the right of the Soviet Union to possess nuclear weapons was somehow equivalent to advocating nuclear war.

Comrade Seymour responded with a litany of the USec's liquidations, adaptations, hallucinations and betrayals. Where Mandel's presentation had been padded with vague allusions to history, Seymour's manner, normally analytical and persuasive, had a somewhat strident and declamatory character. At several points he invoked the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht by the German social democrats, suggesting a parallel with Mandel's adaptation to the counterrevolution in East Europe. It seemed odd that the SL's leading intellectual hardly addressed the objectivist political methodology that underlies the long series of liquidationist adaptations that constitute Mandel's political history. It was almost as if he wanted to show that he wasn't one of the cliquish petty-bourgeois literary types currently under attack in the SL's public press.

The USec supporters who spoke during the discussion period seemed tired, disorganized and depressed. Many of them were old-timers who seemed uninterested, or unable to defend their international's political record. Steve Bloom, a leading Mandel supporter in New York, asserted that the USec's long chronicle of failed opportunist maneuvers and political zigzags was evidence of political health. The one charge levelled by the USec supporters that Seymour could not handle—because it is true—was the observation that the SL is only willing to participate in joint activities (united fronts) with other leftist groups when it has complete organizational control.

If the USec speakers were pathetic, the SLers were merely unimpressive. But that was bad enough, as the

long-anticipated debate with the Karl Kautsky of the late twentieth century had been the focus of considerable internal preparation. This was the SL's opportunity to reinvent itself as the healthy, dynamic and re-politicized organization advocated in the pages of the current issue of *Spartacist*. But this was hardly the impression conveyed by most of the SL speakers. Their interventions had a pre-packaged quality and their expressions of emotion seemed forced. The long years of playing "we are the party" in small rooms full of the converted have evidently not done much to sharpen their political skills.

The meeting descended into near chaos during the summaries when Mandel, piqued by the indictments of his opponent, began a prolonged interruption. Seymour shouted at him to "shut up" but Mandel continued to babble and suggested that the SL might want to send up a few goons to remove him from the stage. Several individuals in the audience began heckling and a particularly persistent one was removed by SL marshals.

We were pleased that two of our comrades had the opportunity to speak and expose the pseudo-Trotskyists on the platform for their responses to the triumph of counterrevolution in the Soviet bloc. But overall the event had a rather degenerate quality. Mandel, once characterized by the SL as possessed of an "agile mind" and "impressive erudition," presented a sad spectacle. But in the end, the SL could do no better than emerge as sore winners.

It is something of a puzzle as to why Ernest Mandel has chosen to debate the Spartacist League at a time when his entire political outlook has proved bankrupt. For more than forty years the leading theoretician of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USec) has attempted to tailor Trotskyism to fit various non-proletarian forces, ranging from maverick Stalinists like Tito, Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara, to outright reactionaries such as the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic fundamentalists and Poland's openly pro-capitalist Solidarnosc.

In the past period the USec has allowed itself to be blown with the prevailing political winds: far to the right. This opportunism was carried to the most revolting extremes when a USec affiliate in Australia formed a political alliance with the expatriate representatives of the Croatian Ustashi, an organization that exceeded even the Nazis in its brutality against Jews in German-dominated Yugoslavia during World War II. Equally appalling was a September 1989 article in the USec's leading English language magazine, *International Viewpoint*, endorsing a call for the rehabilitation of the Estonian "Forest Brothers," a band of World War II Nazi collaborators. And, in August of 1991, when Boris Yeltsin, and the pro-capitalist forces he led, delivered the death blow to the Soviet workers' state, Ernest Mandel and his comrades were to be found, in spirit if not in the

flesh, on the barricades of the counterrevolution. Tariq Ali, a former British USec leader turned cynical careerist, captured his former mentor's shameless opportunism perfectly in his satirical novel, *Redemption* when the main character, obviously modeled on Mandel, hatches a grand scheme for "deep entry" into the world's major churches in an attempt to capitalize on the global resurgence of religion!

How does anyone claiming to be a Marxist end up in the company of mullahs, anti-Semites and open counter-revolutionaries? The motivation is an overweening desire not to be unpopular. Comrade Mandel hopes to avoid the isolation real revolutionaries must often face by adapting politically to the "mass movements" of the moment, regardless of their political character. The ideological rationale is that such movements are guided by some hidden hand of history, some unconscious "process" or "dynamic" that must inexorably steer them in a revolutionary direction despite the reformist, or even reactionary, intentions of their leaders. The necessity for Marxists to fight for leadership on the basis of their own program—Lenin's whole conception of the vanguard party—is thus thrown out the window.

In the 1960s and 70s, as the USec was seeking to trim Trotskyism to the latest political fashions, Mandel's opponent in tonight's debate, the then-revolutionary Spartacist League (SL), consistently opposed his opportunism from a revolutionary Marxist standpoint. To Mandel's kowtowing to Third World peasant-based guerrilla movements, the SL counterposed the Marxist program of *proletarian* revolution. When the USec was trying to worm its way into the good graces of the Sandinistas, the SL argued that the class-collaborationist policies of the Nicaraguan regime would lead to disaster. As the USec, along with the rest of the ostensibly revolutionary left, was hailing Khomeini's "Islamic Revolution," the international Spartacist tendency (iSt) stood virtually alone, insisting that the triumph of Islamic fundamentalism represented no progress over the bloody rule of the Shah. In 1981, while the USec was singing the praises of Solidarnosc, the iSt branded Lech Walesa a clerical reactionary, and denounced Solidarnosc as an imperialist-backed vehicle for capitalist restoration.

On all these points of contention history has now rendered an unambiguous verdict. The New Left infatuation with Third World guerrillas has become a memory, along with the New Left and most guerrilla movements themselves. The Nicaraguan masses have discovered that the "third road" between capitalism and socialism is a dead end. Khomeini's victory in Iran did not produce a mass radicalization, but rather the theocratic dictatorship—drenched in the blood of thousands of leftists—that rules in Teheran today. And Lech Walesa heads a fledgling capitalist state being built on the backs of the Polish workers.

Throughout the years when he was bowing to Khomeini and sidling up to Walesa, Mandel dismissed the SL and other left critics as irrelevant ultra-left sectarians. Now, after events have definitively falsified his every perspective, and with his organization in an advanced state of disintegration, he suddenly chooses to

debate. Mandel can only be unaware of his disadvantage if he is oblivious to the lessons of history. Despite his prodigious erudition and literary output, theory is not for him a means for comprehending reality and guiding revolutionary action, but an ideological gloss for the USec's latest get-rich-quick scheme. When one such scheme fails, he blithely proceeds to next one, and hopes that no one will remember what he had said a few years or even a few months earlier.

Robertson's Spartacist League: No Alternative to Mandel's USec

The International Bolshevik Tendency stands on the record of the revolutionary Spartacist League of the 1960s and 70s. Unfortunately, the Spartacist League has since undergone a profound political degeneration, and can no longer provide a consistently revolutionary alternative to Mandel's opportunism.

The decline of the SL began in the late 1970's, when the wave of student radicalism that permitted the Spartacist League to grow significantly had clearly ebbed, and James Robertson, the group's founder/leader gradually moved to consolidate his absolute and despotic personal control. The mechanism for this was a series of destructive and largely apolitical purges, which targeted cadres who exhibited any significant degree of political independence or critical capacity.

The result is the Spartacist League of today: an involuted and depoliticized obedience cult centered on James Robertson. The External Tendency, precursor of the Bolshevik Tendency, was founded in 1982 by former iSt members who had been driven out during the purges. In 1990, the Bolshevik Tendency fused with the Gruppe IV. Internationale of Germany and the Permanent Revolution Group of New Zealand to launch the International Bolshevik Tendency. These three groups, all founded by former iSt cadres, shared a commitment to carry forward the struggle for Trotskyism that the SL had abandoned. They also shared a recognition that no organization, however formally "correct" its paper program, can ever lead the working class to power if its members are taught—as the Robertsonites are taught by their leaders every day—that blind obedience is the highest virtue of revolutionaries.

The SL leadership has responded to our critique of their internal regime by suggesting that those who dare expose the unpleasant truth about life in Robertson's group are doing the work of either the FBI or the Mossad (Israeli secret police). We therefore note with interest that the SL's latest Perspectives and Tasks document, reprinted as the Autumn 1994 issue of *Spartacist*, contains an organizational self-appraisal that echoes many of the criticisms we have leveled at them over the years.

The document laments the group's lack of connection to the trade unions. It bemoans the membership's "overly passive and propagandist (at best) or abstentionist (at worst) posture in some of the big battles for abortion rights," and concedes that "our skills at effectively combating our opponents have become blunted." On the international front, the document complains that

“we do not yet have any cohesive party collective outside the United States,” and that the overseas sections that constitute the International Communist League (ICL) are little more than “‘Potemkin villages’ which often have been unable to grapple politically with what is going on in their own countries.” The organization’s New York center (which, according to the document, is full of “office-bound” routinists) is apparently also dysfunctional, and lacks a “cohesive, effective Political Bureau and I.S. bodies to lead the work in the SL/U.S. and internationally.”

What Went Wrong?

This unflattering self-portrait undoubtedly reflects the thinking of James Robertson, who, from his vantage point of semi-retirement in the Bay Area, can look upon the organization he has built with greater detachment. He is obviously not pleased with what he sees. But, precisely because the Spartacist League is his own creature, Robertson cannot provide a plausible explanation of what went wrong. The document attributes the SL’s sorry state to the current reactionary political times. And it would be foolish to deny that the Reagan/Bush years, the collapse of Stalinism, the decline of industry, the capitalist offensive against the working class, the deterioration of the educational system and the resulting depoliticizing and a-historicizing of a whole generation, would create severe difficulties for any revolutionary organization. But this is only half the story.

The other half—the half that Robertson and his sycophants and captive intellectuals cannot acknowledge—consists in the role that they themselves played in bringing the group to its present pass. The SL did in fact lose some of its trade-union supporters to layoffs and factory closings. Others got tired and quit. But there were other trade unionists (including Detroit autoworkers, and prominent longshore militants) who were victims of irrational purging campaigns. In the early 1980s, the SL leadership turned away from union work and ripped up an important base in the communications industry, where an SL-supported caucus was recognized as the national opposition to the bureaucracy. These acts of political cannibalism had nothing to do with de-industrialization. They were driven by Robertson’s frustration with the time-consuming and difficult nature of revolutionary trade-union work, coupled with his paranoid fear that trade unionists who acquired their own base among workers might some day end up leading a factional opposition inside the SL.

The trade unionists were not the only ones to get the chop. At about the same time, the organization was suddenly discovered to be full of shits, pigs, thieves, sexual manipulators, crypto-racists, renegades on the Russian question, and at least one proto-fascist. The layer of talented youth who put out *Young Spartacus* were forced out in the so-called clone purge of 1978. The following year, Bill Logan, former head of the Australian and British sections, was framed and expelled at the group’s first international conference as a “sociopath.”

Less spectacular purges followed throughout the early 1980s in almost every section of the iSt.

The Shadow of the Succession Struggle

Is it any wonder, after having thus divested themselves of some of their most creative and political elements, that the SL is now full of time servers, with limited ability to intervene in the left? Can there be any mystery as to why the New York center, which had long been trained in unconditional obedience to a single individual, should cease to function effectively when that same individual retires to California? The current difficulties of the center presage the chaotic power struggle that will erupt when Number One is no longer around to settle all disputes by personal fiat.

The first rumblings can be heard in the Perspectives and Tasks document, which asserts that the succession problem can be solved provided the group does “*not shy away from fights*.” In Spart-speak, a “fight” is a regime-initiated trashing of a particular individual or grouping. The current targets seem to be the leading members of the editorial board of *Workers Vanguard*, who are chastised as “furiously defensive, turf-conscious, hyper-sensitive, arrogant, cliquist [and] anti-Leninist.” The members of the WV collective, who have slavishly endured such abuse for years, may be missing a few vertebrae, but they constitute the brightest and most political element in the group, and are therefore the most logical candidates for future leadership. The fact that Robertson is now publicly attacking the ed board indicates that he is determined not to relax his personal grip on the SL, even if he has ceased to run it directly.

For 25 years Robertson’s group had *no* factions and *no* tendencies. This rather embarrassing record was broken this year when two senior members in Toronto proclaimed a (generally rightist) political opposition within the ICL. Polemics with the dissidents (who have since founded the Leninist Trotskyist Group) provided an opportunity for Robertson to try to oxygenate his ranks, while also giving proof of the ICL’s richly democratic internal life. The oppositionists drew different conclusions. They report that the leadership instructed the membership not to speak to them outside formal political meetings, and noted how on all disputed questions, “the whole of the leadership acquiesced immediately to Robertson’s whimsy.” They concluded that in the ICL, “reality is what the super leader believes it to be at a given moment.”

Politics and the Regime Question

The moribund organization that Robertson bemoans was shaped with his own bureaucratic hatchet. He may regret what the SL has become, but the leadership’s commandist style and the instant submission demanded of the ranks are now too deeply ingrained to change fundamentally. Over the years we have met many people in and around the Spartacist League who argue that the character of the internal regime doesn’t matter so long as its political line remains essentially correct. To this we replied that an organization without a democratic internal life lacks the capacity to correct the errors

of its leader, and must inevitably go off the rails politically.

The first confirmations of our prognosis came in a series of rightist departures from the SL's Trotskyist past. In 1981, SL contingents appeared in the Central American solidarity demonstrations waving the flag of the Salvadoran FMLN, the military wing of the popular front. In 1983, when a U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut was demolished by an Islamic fundamentalist truck bomb—an act which any Trotskyist organization worthy of the name would regard as a justified blow against the imperialist invaders—the SL responded with the mealy-mouthed, social-patriotic call for “Marines Out of Lebanon, Now, Alive!” This was followed in 1984 by an absurd offer to defend the Democratic Convention taking place that summer in San Francisco from the imaginary danger of a fascist/Reaganite attack. And in 1986, when the space shuttle Challenger, loaded with anti-Soviet espionage devices and U.S. military personnel, self-destructed, the SL decried its fate as “tragic.”

Why this sudden solicitude for imperialist troops and capitalist political parties? The answer is that Robertson's organization had acquired some substantial material assets, and he was enjoying a comfortable lifestyle at his members' expense. He worried that some eager Reaganite prosecutor might be looking for a domestic surrogate for the “Evil Empire.” Thus it was necessary to signal that the SL were not the fire-breathing revolutionaries they sometimes sounded like in the pages of *Workers Vanguard*.

The SL's central cadre were generally prepared to overlook these “minor” departures from Leninism, but they cannot ignore the demonstrated political incapacity of the infallible leader's response to the protracted crisis and eventual collapse of the Soviet bloc. For a group which long considered itself to possess special competence and “uniquely correct” insights on the Russian question, this had particular significance. With the onset of the second cold war, the SL leadership began to exhibit clearly Stalinophilic behavior—that is, to identify politically with certain factions and personalities within the Stalinist bureaucracy. An early example was the 1980 call to “Hail Red Army in Afghanistan!” rather than simply calling for its military victory, as the SL had for the Viet Cong in the 1960s. In 1982 an SL contingent in an anti-Klan demonstration was dubbed the “Yuri Andropov Brigade,” after Brezhnev's recently appointed successor. This became the subject of a series of polemics between ourselves and the SL leadership in which the latter's Stalinophilic tilt was clearly revealed. When Andropov died in 1984 *WV* ran a laudatory *in memoriam* box for him on the front page.

In 1989, when the DDR (East German) regime entered its terminal crisis, the Spartacist League and its overseas branches made an extraordinary investment of cash and personnel in an attempt to influence the outcome. The intervention was based on two premises: first, that a proletarian political revolution was actually underway, and, second, that a wing of the bureaucracy would break to the left and resist capitalist reunification. This self-delusion reached absurd heights when Robertson traveled to Berlin and tried to arrange an audience with Markus

Wolf (DDR master-spy), Gregor Gysi (head of the DDR's ruling party) and/or Soviet military commander General B.V. Snetkov. But instead of availing themselves of Robertson's advice on how to oppose capitalist restoration, the ruling Stalinist apparatus collaborated in liquidating the workers' state. Eventually, when reality could no longer be denied, the ICL cadres were plunged into profound confusion and demoralization—from which they have not recovered to this day.

Getting Russia Wrong

This disorientation prevented the SL from responding in a principled fashion when the Stalinists actually did attempt to hold the line against counterrevolution—in Moscow in August 1991. In the confrontation between the open partisans of capitalism gathered around Boris Yeltsin, and the sclerotic Stalinist “hardliners” attempting to preserve the status quo, the SL took no side. For this abject failure they give several thoroughly unconvincing rationalizations: first, that the coup leaders and the followers of Yeltsin were equally dedicated to capitalist restoration, which even the SL does not really believe; second, that the coupists never tried to move against Yeltsin, which is not true; and third, that they made no attempt to mobilize the working class, which is true but irrelevant—Trotskyists have never demanded that the Stalinists mobilize the working class as a condition for supporting them militarily against counterrevolutionaries.

Throughout the 1980s, and especially in its intervention in the DDR, the SL leadership began to look to sections of the Stalinist bureaucracy to oppose the imperialists and defend the workers' states. When the East German Stalinists failed to do so, the Robertsonites were bitterly disappointed that the bureaucrats had proved unworthy of their high hopes, and refused to side with the wing of the Soviet Stalinists that did eventually attempt to resist, however inadequately. This kind of political zigzagging is typical of centrists. By contrast, we criticized the SL for its affinity for Yuri Andropov and its illusions in the DDR Stalinists, but also sided with the coup leaders against Yeltsin in 1991. We saw the Stalinists as being neither more nor less than what they were.

Since Yanayev's aborted Moscow coup, SL attempts to redeem their failure have only succeeded in entangling them even more hopelessly in a web of self-contradiction. They argue that, although they did not take a side in the coup attempt, they were not neutral. But if, as they also claim, both sides were equally intent on restoring capitalism, what was wrong with being neutral? They claim that they would have supported the coup leaders militarily *if* the latter had mobilized the Soviet working class to crush Yeltsin. But if the coup leaders were also restorationists, why should we want to see the workers take their side? On the other hand, if the coup leaders were resisting restoration, was it not the duty of Trotskyists to defend them regardless of whether or not they called out the workers? The Spartacist League can answer none of these questions.

Nor can they say exactly when the former USSR

ceased to be a workers' state. For well over a year the SL downplayed the significance of the coup in order to minimize the importance of their failure to take a side in it. SLers continued to insist that, despite Yeltsin's victory, nothing fundamental had changed in the USSR. Then, out of the blue, they announced that the Soviet workers' state was no more. But no word on when, why or how. They simply say that, however the transformation came to pass, it did not take place in August 1991, and confine themselves to vague mutterings about Russia gradually transforming itself into a capitalist state sometime after 1991 as a result of the lack of working-class resistance to Yeltsin.

These errors were compounded last year, when, after first correctly describing the October 1993 shoot-out between Yeltsin and Rutskoi as a "squabble between corrupt and cynical factions" of the counterrevolution, and noting that "Rutskoi/Khasbulatov and the fascist-infested 'red-brown' coalition that supported them are no less hostile to the working class than is Yeltsin" (WV, 8 October 1993), Robertson reversed the position, and *Workers Vanguard* announced without any explanation that they should have sided with Rutskoi/Khasbulatov against Yeltsin. Thus the SL, which refused to support the Stalinists militarily against the capitalist restorationists when the survival of the Soviet Union was at stake, ended up taking sides when the counterrevolutionaries fell out among themselves two years later.

The Spartacist League now finds itself in a state of complete confusion regarding the single question that more than any other had defined it as a tendency—the Russian question. This is not simply a case of faulty analysis. The adaptation to Stalinism in the early 1980s, like the social-patriotic deviations, could easily have been reversed in a healthy, democratic-centralist group. Even the misestimate of the situation in the DDR, or the failure to grasp the significance of the August 1991 events, do not in themselves constitute betrayals. Honest revolutionaries can make mistakes. The SL, however, lacks the capacity for correcting these mistakes that only a democratic internal life can provide. It is the doctrine of Robertsonian infallibility, and the adamant refusal to acknowledge that an opponent could be right where it was wrong, that drives the SL to persist in and com-

pound its original errors, to play havoc with reality in the process, and finally to descend gradually into incoherence.

In the SL we have a living illustration of why the question of a group's internal regime cannot be divorced from its politics. Any leader whose authority cannot be questioned must inevitably come to regard the group's program as synonymous with the preservation of his own personal authority. The reverse side of this coin is that the leader's mistakes become incorporated in the program. Error feeds upon error, until the organization ends up in a very different political place from the one in which it began. James Robertson, by destroying any semblance of internal democratic life in the SL and reducing those below him to silence on all important questions, long ago took the first irrevocable steps on the road to political oblivion.

Red Ain't Dead!

The protagonists in tonight's debate display a certain dismal symmetry. They illustrate two of the most common pitfalls for revolutionary organizations in periods when the workers' movement is in retreat: the tendency to opportunist adaptation on the one hand, and, on the other, the tendency to turn inward and become a lifeless, deracinated leader cult. Yet such degenerations are not inevitable. The party that led the world's only successful proletarian revolution was neither an opportunist swamp nor a bureaucratic cult of personality. The Bolshevik Party of Lenin and Trotsky, based upon the working class, succeeded in drawing to itself the most advanced revolutionary elements of its own society, and combining a rich internal democratic life with the capacity for unified and decisive action. We take this party as our model. There can be no guarantees in revolutionary politics, but two things are certain: first, that the only answer to the deepening political and economic disarray of the international capitalist order is workers' revolution; second, that without a Leninist party such a revolution will never see victory. In this, the epoch of wars and revolutions, the future of humanity hinges on the question of proletarian leadership.

Forward to the Rebirth of the Fourth International!