

# Trotskyist Revolutionary Internationalism vs. Robertson's Bogus Brigade

In our previous issue, we commented on the Spartacist League's (SL) cynical "offer" to dispatch a military expedition to assist Najibullah and his People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). As it turned out, we were not the only ones to look askance at the mock heroics attending the imaginary Spartacist battalion. The eccentric left-Stalinists who publish the British *Leninist*, for example, observed that such expeditions are particularly easy to arrange "when there is not a snowball's chance in hell that the government in Kabul will take them up on the offer...."

Reservations about the advisability of the brigade gambit were widespread even within the Spartacist group itself. In France, dissension over this issue blew apart the group's only significant fusion in a decade (see accompanying article). But even in North America, the ranks were uneasy with the proposal. The SL leadership for its part has staked its prestige on the defense of its fake proposal, and charges that critics can only be motivated by "anti-communism."

In fact, Spartacist guru James Robertson never intended to mobilize anyone for Afghanistan. This is demonstrated by the glib assertions of a variety of SL cadres that their contingent would have been largely recruited *in Pakistan*, under the nose of the mujahedeen and their quartermasters! Unlike the SL tops, the cadres of the Fourth International were not in the business of trying to impress the uninitiated with pseudo-revolutionary posturing. Had anyone seriously suggested to Trotsky or Cannon in 1935 that the SWP organize a brigade in what was then Italian Somaliland (adjacent to Abyssinia) to intervene on the side of Haile Selassie in his fight against Mussolini, they probably would have been considered to be mentally ill. But the Robertsonites were of course not in earnest and never had any intention of opening a recruiting office in Peshawar or Karachi.

The 23 June issue of *Workers Vanguard* (WV) claimed that the SL's make-believe Kabul brigade "came straight out of our revolutionary heritage" and quoted a message from the 1938 founding conference of the Fourth International saluting the Trotskyist militants who participated in "the first days of the fight against Franco." This attempt to equate the SL's cynical publicity stunt with the heroic intervention of the Trotskyists in Spain is absurd and disgraceful. Leaving aside for the moment the disparity between the genuine internationalism of the Trotskyists in the 1930s and the hollow grandstanding of the Spartacist leadership, the political situation in Spain in 1936 was qualitatively different from that of Afghanistan today. Abyssinia would in fact provide a much closer analogy.

During the first days of the Spanish Civil War (the period to which WV's citations refer), the objective conditions existed for the immediate victory of the *proletarian revolution*. In "The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warn-

ing," written in December 1937, Trotsky commented: "In its specific gravity in the country's economic life, in its political and cultural level, the Spanish proletariat stood on the first day of the revolution not below but above the Russian proletariat at the beginning of 1917." A revolutionary breakthrough by the Spanish workers could have changed the course of world history. Contemporary Afghanistan, on the other hand, is a country which, as we wrote in *1917* No. 5: "is so monumentally backward that the working class does not exist as a significant social force. In this situation, *some* kind of outside intervention is necessary to emancipate the Afghan masses from quasi-feudal despotism." But the posturing of the Robertsonites is not going to emancipate anybody.

The Trotskyist militants who fought against Franco simultaneously agitated politically within the Republican militias for a break with the class-collaborationist popular front, for the consolidation of working-class power and the expropriation of the bourgeoisie. After the initial revolutionary upsurge of the Spanish working class had been derailed by a combination of anarcho-reformist misleadership and murderous Stalinist police terror, Trotsky quite categorically opposed a policy of simple "support" to the anti-revolutionary Republicans:

"Will we, as a revolutionary party, mobilize new volunteers for Negrin? That would be to send them into the hands of the GPU. Collect money for the Negrin government? Absurd! We will collect money for our own comrades in Spain. If we send comrades across the border, it will be conspiratorially, for our own movement."

—"Answer to Questions..." 14 September 1937

However, the Trotskyists were certainly not neutral in the Spanish civil war. While they militarily defended the popular-front government against Franco, they did not for a moment soften their criticisms of the Republicans. Nor did they pledge anything but extremely conditional obedience to their bloc partners:

"We have not the slightest confidence in the capacity of this government to conduct the war and assure victory. We accuse this government of protecting the rich and starving the poor. This government must be smashed. So long as we are not strong enough to replace it, we are fighting under its command. But on every occasion we express openly our nonconfidence in it; it is the only possible way to mobilize the masses *politically* against this government and to prepare its overthrow. Any other politics would be a betrayal of the revolution."

—*Ibid.*

This has an entirely different flavor than the Robertsonites' hypothetical pledge to put themselves under the "control and direction" of the petty-bourgeois Stalinist PDPA of Najibullah.

## On Picking Coffee in Nicaragua

The SL leadership has obviously been feeling some political pressure over the question of its phony pro-

posal. Accordingly, a *WV* hack was assigned to crank out a response (of sorts) to our letter of 16 March. This piece, entitled “BT Cringes on Afghanistan Defense,” appeared in the July 21 issue of *WV*. It defensively suggested that the SL’s Afghan offer was really little different than the participation of Spartacist members on various coffee-picking “brigades” to Nicaragua. *WV* noted, “the BT has not (yet) denounced these activities. Why not?” Well, for one thing, the SLers who went to Nicaragua did so as individual members of the various rad-lib coffee-picking excursions encouraged by the Sandinistas. The Nicaraguan brigades therefore lacked the farcical quality of the Robertsonite offer to Najibullah of an imaginary brigade to “fight to the death.” SL members have as much right as anyone to join with the assorted radicals, liberals and Christians picking coffee and having their pictures taken with FSLN soldiers.

We respect the subjective commitment of the thousands of decent individuals who journeyed to Nicaragua in order to take a stand in defense of the revolution against the system of imperialist piracy and human misery. Some of them, like Ben Linder, lost their lives at the hands of Reagan’s contra cutthroats. But organizations which purport to represent the revolutionary continuity of Lenin and Trotsky must be judged by a different standard than the thousands of “sandalistas” who travelled to Managua. And by that criterion the SL’s Nicaraguan work leaves plenty to be desired.

In 1964, when SL cadre Shirley Stoute joined a brigade to Cuba, she did not simply harvest sugar cane; she attempted to make contact with the Partido Obrero Revolucionario (POR), the only organization in Cuba which identified itself with Trotsky. Her report, which appeared in *Spartacist* No. 3, was the first to publicize the persecution of these comrades by the bonapartist Castro regime. Stoute’s activity, at the height of Castro’s popularity in the American left, demonstrated how seriously the early SL took its revolutionary internationalist responsibilities.

A decade later, during the massive popular upheavals in Portugal in 1974-75, *WV* correspondents attentively followed developments of the complex and fluid political situation and paid particular attention to the organized “far left.” The SL journalists were not merely interpreting the world but actually struggling to *change* it by seeking to engage, influence and ultimately win over the most advanced elements of the Portuguese left to Trotskyism.

Unfortunately the SL of the 1980s is not the same organization that it once was. The SL leaders no longer believe in the program for which they once fought and to which they still nominally adhere. The various accounts by SL “brigadistas” who visited Nicaragua contained a token sentence or two of leftist criticism, but they generally had the flavor of vapid rad-lib travelogues. *WV* showed little interest in the groups to the left of the FSLN and paid scant attention to developments in the Nicaraguan working class.

*WV* attempts to cite the SL’s Nicaraguan activity to justify its Afghan proposal. Yet the passive and essentially adaptive character of its intervention in Nicaragua demonstrated how far it has moved from the revolution-

ary internationalism of its past. The Nicaraguan revolution, although it took place in a small country and was beset from the beginning by immense objective difficulties, could have represented a potent revolutionary factor in the increasingly volatile social situation in Latin America, ravaged by Wall Street loan sharks and the IMF. The massive and semi-spontaneous participation of hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguan workers and poor people in the 1979 insurrection which destroyed the bourgeois state gave Nicaragua a special significance for Marxists, and created a political space for working-class politics which did not exist in the aftermath of the revolutions in Cuba, China or Yugoslavia. In Nicaragua, unlike in Afghanistan, a genuinely Leninist organization of even a few score could have gained a significant mass base and become a real factor in the outcome of the revolution.

Of course the SL is not large or powerful, and the impact of any organization is limited by its resources. But the point is, the SL did not make a serious attempt. Dozens of SL members made it down to Nicaragua. But when they got there, instead of attempting to function as Shirley Stoute had in 1964, they confined themselves to the role of leftist solidarity activists. Despite its formal positions, it is clear that the Spartacist leadership no longer believes in the possibility of a political breakthrough by the proletariat in Central America (or anywhere else). Even where their paper positions retain an “orthodox” character, the commitment to struggle for the victory of the Marxist program no longer guides the activity of the group.

### Spartacist League in Afghanistan

The same issue of *WV* which contains the defense of the Afghan brigade stunt also features a report of one Robertsonite’s trip to Jalalabad to present funds raised by the SL’s Partisan Defense Committee (PDC) for the relief of the victims of mujahedeen terror. Leftists side militarily with the PDPA and their supporters against the imperialist backed tribalist reactionaries. But the *WV* dispatch is written in a style reminiscent of Jack Barnes’ *Militant*. Apparently the *WV* correspondent dashed off the account shortly after dismounting from atop an armored car “at the head of the line of march of today’s victory celebration” in Jalalabad, which may account for its breathless style. The article triumphantly refers to a “message of acknowledgement from the Nangarhar Province Defence Council to the PDC.” Indeed, according to the *WV* account, the PDPA did more than just acknowledge the Spartacists, it positively *hailed* them as: “real friends of the Afghan people, supporters of peace and love with human-being.” High praise indeed!

Besides riding on an armored car, the highlight of the PDC/SL reporter’s visit to Jalalabad seems to have been a meeting with the governor. Unlike the other correspondents, who had to be satisfied with handshakes, the *WV* representative was *embraced*! This intimacy afforded the opportunity for a searching question to Najibullah’s deputy: “I asked the governor if the defenders and people of Jalalabad are aware that in many countries of

the world, working people are following their struggle with extreme concern.” The governor replied in the affirmative and once more thanked the PDC. End of interview.

All very friendly and cordial. But in writing this up, the correspondent (or perhaps the WV editor) decided that it might be wise to project a more critical demeanor, and accordingly tacked on a paragraph chastising the PDPA for conciliating reaction and for its willingness to leave the mujahedeen contras “in control of their fiefdoms.” No doubt the correspondent was too busy embracing and exchanging pleasantries with the governor to raise such trifles while actually on the spot.

The SL leadership’s gratitude for the “acknowledgement” of the Afghan Stalinists, like its “hailing” of Leonid Brezhnev’s military intervention in the first place, derives from its abandonment of the Trotskyist program which it once upheld. This is not an unprecedented development. Those who despair of the historic possibility of the working class, led by a conscious Trotskyist vanguard, successfully intervening to change history, have often sought alternative agencies of social progress.

Some of the SL’s leftist critics assert that the Robertson-ites have acquired a Stalinophilic character. Certainly parading around as the “Yuri Andropov Brigade,” “hailing” the Soviet army and hanging a picture of Polish Stalinist General Jaruzelski in the group’s New York headquarters, would seem to lend credence to such an interpretation. But to see the SL as Stalinophilic is to mistake appearance for essence.

The fact is that the SL’s much-vaunted Soviet defensism is only skin deep. In the past decade it has often been thrown overboard when a posture of Soviet defensism was likely to incur the displeasure of the American ruling class. When the Soviets downed the KAL-007 spy

plane in 1983 as it flew over their most sensitive military installations, the SL rushed to assert that, “If the government of the Soviet Union knew that the intruding aircraft was in fact a commercial passenger plane,” then, “*despite the potential military damage of such an apparent spying mission*” shooting it down “would have been *worse than a barbaric atrocity*” (emphasis added). Likewise, when the U.S. shuttle Challenger self-destructed in 1986 during a mission for the U.S. military in conjunction with the anti-Soviet Star Wars program, the SL joined the Reagan administration in characterizing as “tragic” the loss of six Reaganauts.

The primary concern of the SL leadership is no longer programmatic consistency but rather safeguarding the material assets of the group and guaranteeing the creature comforts of the *lider maximo*. This is not to deny that the SL leadership retains an interest in “high Trotskyism,” and particularly in archival pursuits related to it. Robertson himself undoubtedly retains residual interest in things political. Besides, a certain amount of big “P” politics is necessary to hold an ostensibly Marxist group together and ensure that the dues base is regularly replenished.

The SL’s initial fake offer of a Kabul brigade, and the necessarily abysmal quality of the arguments advanced to defend it, cannot be attributed to a lack of experience or political sophistication, or even to a skewed perception of reality. Today the overriding characteristic of the political bandits who run the SL is *cynicism*, a quality which marks the once-revolutionary Spartacist League as one of the nastier cultist outfits on the American left. And Robertson’s hypothetical brigade for Kabul (which we suggested he might want to name after Leonid Brezhnev whose Afghan policies the SL continues to insist on “hailing”) is, above all, cynical. ■