

# Interview With Geoff White (Part 1)

## From Stalinism to Trotskyism

The following is the first part of an interview with Geoff White, one of the leaders of the Revolutionary Tendency (RT) within the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the early 1960s. The SWP, whose founding cadres had broken with the Communist Party (CPUSA) in 1928, in opposition to the Stalinist degeneration of the Communist International, was the American section of the Fourth International founded by Leon Trotsky. White and the other leaders of the RT were bureaucratically expelled in December 1963 for their Trotskyist critique of the pro-Castroist liquidationism of the SWP majority. They immediately began to publish a journal, *Spartacist*, and launched the Spartacist League (SL) in 1966.

The SWP's adulation of Fidel Castro as an "unconscious Marxist" in the early 1960s led inexorably to their formal repudiation of Trotskyism twenty years later. In its fight within the SWP, the RT correctly characterized Cuba as a "deformed workers state" ruled by a bureaucratic caste equivalent to those ruling in East Europe and China. The RT's defense of the revolutionary tradition of Trotskyism within the party which had been the flagship section of the Fourth International, constitutes a vital link in the struggle for Marxist continuity in our time.

Geoff White's story is a particularly interesting one. After spending a decade as a Communist Party cadre, White was one of a tiny handful of American CPers who moved left, instead of right, as a result of the crisis of world Stalinism touched off in 1956 by Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's crimes, and Moscow's brutal suppression of an attempted political revolution by pro-socialist Hungarian workers. In 1957 White left the CP and the next year he joined the SWP.

In 1953, the SWP had successfully defeated a revisionist internal opposition which wanted to "junk the old Trotskyism." Led by Bert Cochran and George Clarke, and linked to the International Secretariat of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, this faction proposed to replace the "old Trotskyism" with a policy of adaptation to the Stalinists and the trade-union bureaucracy. While the SWP's struggle against this new "Pabloist" revisionism was seriously flawed in both conception and execution, the SWP leadership's defense of the historic necessity of the Marxist vanguard in the struggle for world socialist revolution was qualitatively superior to the objectivism and liquidationism of Pablo/Cochran.

Unfortunately, the combination of extreme social isolation and the perceived irrelevance of revolutionary Marxism in America during the Eisenhower years, sapped the revolutionary capacity of the SWP. When Fidel Castro took power in Cuba and began to expropriate the capitalists in 1960, the SWP quickly signed on as uncritical publicity agents for the new regime. This abandonment of independent working-class politics in favor of adulation of the petty-bourgeois guerrillaists of the July

26 Movement signaled the end of the SWP as a revolutionary party. The organization's capitulation to Castroism eventually culminated in the 1963 reunification with the European Pabloists.

The RT's principled defense of the SWP's history and traditions was essential to the survival and development of Trotskyism in North America and, ultimately, internationally. Geoff White played a central role in this political fight, both as the leader of the tendency's largest branch and as the author of the first draft of the RT's founding document, "In Defense of a Revolutionary Perspective." This fine document remains an important restatement of the fundamentals of Marxism in the imperialist epoch, and the Bolshevik Tendency proudly claims it as part of our revolutionary heritage.

Trotsky observed that revolutions and revolutionary movements have a tendency to devour their children. The difficulty of "swimming against the stream" in bourgeois society wears many revolutionaries out. Some "re-interpret" Marxism to conform to various non-revolutionary appetites. Others just fade away. Today, none of the original leaders of the RT (Tim Wohlforth, Shane Mage, James Robertson and Geoff White) still adhere to the revolutionary perspectives of the RT. Wohlforth was the first. Less than a year after the RT was launched, he engineered a criminal split of the tendency at the behest of Gerry Healy, leader of the British Socialist Labour League. Shane Mage, the group's somewhat erratic theoretician, spun out of the movement a few years later. James Robertson alone has remained active in organized politics but, in the course of transforming the once-revolutionary Spartacist League into a pseudo-Trotskyist obedience cult, he too has broken with his own revolutionary past. As for Geoff White, he simply drop-ped out of revolutionary politics in 1968. Yet his contributions, and those of the other RTers, live on.

White's account of his involvement in revolutionary politics, which will be continued in forthcoming issues of *1917*, throws considerable light on an important chapter in the history of Trotskyism.

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*1917: A good place to start might be with your background, your family, what your parents did, where you went to school.*  
 GW: Well, I'll try to keep this brief because it's not very interesting. It's sort of a middle-class American background. My family were WASPs, my father was a civil engineer working for the state of New York, which meant that when I was a kid, we moved around a lot in the upstate New York region, so I come from a sort of semi-rural New York background, although not really a rural life because we weren't farmers or anything like that, even though we did live on farms from time to time.

Politically my father was a Republican and fairly conservative. His ideas came mainly from the 1880s and 1890s which he picked up when he was in college in the

first decade of the twentieth century and he hadn't really updated them much when he died in 1981. My mother was somewhat more liberal but not much, so that my family background was fairly conservative. I did my secondary education at a private school of no particular distinction called Northwood in Lake Placid, New York, and that's where I began to get left-wing ideas. Everybody up there assumed that they were somehow destined to be part of the leadership of the future of America, and I didn't have a terribly high opinion of their qualifications.

So I began to ask some questions about by what kind of divine right was this group to become the leadership, and one thing led to another, and I began to get considerably radicalized before I was out of high school, but I had no contact with any groups or really with any ideology. I'd read lots of books by Upton Sinclair and nothing by Lenin and Marx.

I finished high school in 1944, and then I went to Harvard and of course there things were very different, because there were all kinds of groups around. I met a lot of very bright young people from New York City who were involved in radical politics mainly in and around the Communist Party [CP]. Also there were a few Trotskyists there, and for a while I was attending SWP [Socialist Workers Party] forums in New York in the last year I was in high school and my first year in college. Then I went into the Navy and I had a lot of time there to do a lot reading. So I read what, for that period, seemed to be fairly thoroughly in Lenin and Marx and the other Marxist classics. I came out of the Navy after about a year and half feeling that I was a communist.

*1917: What year was this?*

GW: This would be 1946. I went back to Harvard, picked up where I'd left off, joined the Communist Party after a month or two, and was in the CP for about 10 years after that—I left in February of 1957.

*1917: You mentioned that you helped organize a meeting at Harvard in defense of two of the Minneapolis Trotskyist Smith Act defendants. How large was the meeting?*

GW: I don't know because by the time the meeting actually took place, I was in the Navy. I helped get it set up but I wasn't around for the actual meeting.

*1917: But when you came back from the Navy, you ended up joining the CP instead of the SWP.*

GW: Yes. It seemed to me that the SWP and the Trotskyists were unrelated to the day-to-day struggle. They seemed to have very little influence over the actual course of events, they seemed sectarian, whereas the CP seemed to be able to actually shape the course of events to a limited extent. It seemed to me they were the main line, and they were attractive to me on an empirical basis. It may also be that I had some authoritarian tendencies which responded to the CP's ideological position. I'd say that now in retrospect; I had no feeling of that at the time. My insight is not good enough to really know if that was true but it's a possibility certainly.

*1917: So you spent 10 years in the CP. Those were not easy years to be in the CP, while your organization went from being fairly influential to a group which bore the brunt of a pretty*

*vicious witchhunt. A lot of people deserted under the pressure. What was your sense of that period, and how did it affect you and people that you were close to?*

GW:: Well, it felt very embattled. I joined in late 1946, and from then until about 1948 one could maintain a certain degree of optimism. I think 1948 was really the turning point—after that, one's optimism was more historical than immediate. I went to Europe in 1948 to attend the World Congress of Working Youth in Warsaw, and I was also one of the delegates of the American Youth for Democracy to the Executive Committee of the International Union of Students meeting in Paris late that summer. This gave me a lot of contact with people from Eastern Europe and the movement in Western Europe also. I found this a sort of energizing thing. We felt, I think, most of us—and I certainly did—that we were part of the wave of the future and that things in the long run would turn out well for us, but we also felt very much under the gun and under a great deal of pressure domestically.

Our response to this pressure took a number of different forms, one of them was to sort of prepare for fascist oppression. At one point a lot of the leaders of the CP went into a category which we called "unavailable," meaning that they were supposed to be underground. They were running around with false moustaches and false names and so forth, and trying to give leadership to the party from underground. It was a very unsuccessful experiment because, for one thing, the party was heavily infiltrated with FBI and other types of agents so the government by and large knew where these guys were. The other thing was it created an increasingly paranoid atmosphere within the party, disrupted the lines of communication, and made things more difficult. I think it was an error of a fairly serious kind.

My role was that for a time I acted as a liaison man between a couple of people who were unavailable and the open apparatus. I was pretty much in the open but I did have these contacts, so there was a certain amount of romantic running around, the FBI tracing and chasing one around in cars.

*1917: You were quite aware of the FBI tailing you?*

GW: Oh yeah, they were quite open about that. They would hang around in front of the house and whenever I went out in my car, they would be following. They weren't very subtle about their shadowing. In Rhode Island at least, they had license plates which were all in sequence. They'd taken out a list of license plates and we knew what the sequence was, so we knew who these guys were. I got to recognize some of the individuals, and so it had certain game aspects. But it was also a serious matter, since people were being arrested and people were being fired from their jobs and otherwise harassed.

*1917: You were in the Communist Party in Rhode Island at this point?*

GW: Yes, I joined at Harvard, and I was student secretary for New England for a while. But then I graduated and the party had a policy of industrial concentration—of sending young middle-class proto-intellectuals into factories and industries in which they were interested in

having some influence. In New England this meant especially the textile industry, which was dying but still was a good base in the working class. I went to Rhode Island and went to work in a textile mill down there. Economic conditions weren't too good in Rhode Island at that time and so I got laid off and I went to work in a rubber plant. That turned out to be a good thing because it had an active union, and I got to be a shop steward there and the editor of the local's newspaper.

*1917: So what years did you work in rubber?*

GW: Well let's see, I went to Rhode Island in late 1949 and I think I spent a year and half in textiles, so it must have been around 1951 to late 1955 that I was in the United Rubber Workers down there. I got to be convention delegate and a few things like that and we had a small fraction in this local, Local 103 in Cranston, Rhode Island. But my main activity was that I became the secretary of the Communist Party in Rhode Island, and it was a matter of trying to hold the party together there. During this whole McCarthyite period there was a constant attrition of the party. Looking back on it, I think we did fairly well in holding together as well as we did, but each year we were a little smaller and a little more isolated. We lost almost all of our industrial base, our middle-class members had less and less influence in whatever areas they were working in, if any, and pretty soon it became more and more a matter of just collecting dues and holding meetings and trying to sell a few subs to various publications. We were not able to have any influence in any sector of public life or union life down there even though we did maintain a few trade-union fractions.

*1917: How large would the Communist Party in Rhode Island be in that period?*

GW: It was a long time ago, and I probably should say this about all these reminiscences that go back that far—they're subject to distortions of memory—but I think we started out with about 50 and I think we ended up with about 20.

*1917: Did you have any notable defections from your branch, did people just quit, or did anyone turn up testifying against you?*

GW: No, nobody, there were no what you would call renegades. We were infiltrated by a guy from New Bedford who had been working for the FBI from the beginning, but that's rather a different thing than defection. This was not a political defection, this was just plain old-fashioned infiltration. To the best of my knowledge, there were no other publicly acknowledged infiltrators in the Rhode Island party. One guy down there was enough to keep track of things.

*1917: How did you eventually find out about this guy?*

GW: That's an interesting story and, looking back on it, it seems terribly improbable. But one of the things you were supposed to do was to sell subscriptions to various publications; there was one labor publication, I can't remember the name of it now. It was actually edited by a guy who had been on the National Executive of the CIO back in the old days, and he'd been thrown out of the CIO, and now he was editing this publication which

was supposed to be for left-wing trade unions. They were pushing this pretty hard in the New Bedford, Fall River, Providence areas plus the *Daily Worker*.

At any rate, there was this guy from New Bedford who had a pretty good working-class background. He was working in and around textile mills—he was sort of upwardly mobile so he was out of that a bit, but he knew people in that. Since there was no active group in New Bedford at the time, he was working somewhat independently, under the leadership of people from Providence. It was obvious he got around a lot, and we found out the subs he'd been selling (which he'd done quite well at) were fake, and there were a couple of other discrepancies which made us suspicious of him. Finally we got hold of a dossier of one of our members who was called in and questioned about some things, and the information that was in there was available only to three people. I was one of them, another was a guy who was a functionary of the party, and this fellow from New Bedford. So the suspicion fell on him.

For a while we kept him pretty much at arm's length, but then for some reason—and this was not discussed with me, I believe, and I didn't question it, and at this point the whole thing seems very improbable—we let him back in, and he again became active in things even though we knew one of the three of us was making reports. Well, in 1956 the New England Smith Act indictments came down. I was one of the defendants in that case. There were eight of us, and it was very clear from the bill of particulars in the indictment that this guy had been reporting. So at this point we severed our connections with him and he subsequently testified publicly he had been working with the FBI, not as an agent but as an operative.

*1917: You were no longer in New England when the Smith Act indictments came down?*

GW: No. In February of 1956, this industrial concentration policy was expanded to include trying to re-establish the party in the South. They were trying to get some people to go down to the South to do essentially the same work I was doing in Rhode Island, but of course conditions were rather different there. If I went to the South, I would not be doing this specific party work because the party apparatus had been destroyed almost everywhere in the South. The last remnant of it had been in Atlanta, and they finally ran the organizer in Atlanta out, so that we were in very bad shape in the South. But we did have some historical roots in Durham, Atlanta, and a couple of places in Alabama, so they asked me and my wife if we would be willing to go into the South. This was a rather large order, so we gave it a lot of thought and finally decided we would, but we didn't really think we could do it in either Georgia or Alabama. So what we ended up with was going to Chattanooga which is right on the Alabama/Georgia/Tennessee border, and has a pretty good industrial base.

We went down there in early February of 1956, and we were then ourselves always unavailable. We were operating under our own names etc., but nobody was supposed to know where we were, although of course everybody did. We weren't to have any contact with the

party, except occasionally they would send somebody down to see us. We were to just dig into the community, not engage in any particular political work—just make friends, contacts, get to know the community, get rooted in the community. The idea was that eventually we would emerge with something. There were some contacts down there in that area with a group in either the Church of Christ or the Church of God—seems to me it was the Church of Christ—which was rather a peculiar thing because this was a little fundamentalist church. But there were some contacts there, and there was one minister in Dalton Georgia, which was near Chattanooga, who eventually got run out.

*1917: This was a black minister?*

GW: No white, white. That was interesting. The CP was trying to re-establish contacts in the white working class and build some kind of a structure there. The theory at that time was that it was easier to make contacts and even easier perhaps to recruit among the blacks, but you could not really maintain an organization among the blacks in the South unless you had a base among the whites. I think that there was a good deal of truth in this, and the idea of putting the concentration on the white industries like textile and the needle trades and less energy into the black industries which would be steel, food and tobacco made a lot of sense. Because given the pressured situation in the South at that time, having a base among the white working class was I think essential to maintaining a serious base among blacks.

*1917: How do you mean it was essential?*

GW: Well, in the first place, to maintain some credibility with your black contacts. In the opinion of many of the black radicals down there at that time, what was the need for a predominantly black organization unless it could deliver the kind of white support, and liaison with white groupings, that a white-dominated organization could in theory have? If the Communist Party in the South was going to be a black organization, there was no point in it being a Communist Party group—there was already a black structure there which could do that. But the Communist Party could be a bridge, some blacks thought, to supportive sections of the white community. This was perhaps an illusion, but it was a plausible one.

*1917: Did you take any left-wing books to Chattanooga or did you have to have a "clean" house?*

GW: Clean house, clean house. No documents, no nothing.

*1917: Were there many people from the CP dispatched in similar kinds of assignments to get the party going again in the South or were you relatively unusual?*

GW: I think in theory it was a campaign to send a good number of people down there. In practice I think there were very few of us. There was a lot of secrecy around this sort of thing, and I don't know how many other people were sent down there under similar circumstances. My impression was very few.

*1917: The contacts that you had down there initially, would they be ex-party members or former contacts?*

GW: We had no contacts, we were not to contact any-

body. We were to make our own contacts socially.

*1917: What was the connection with the people in the Church of Christ?*

GW: Well it was simply indicated that there was some kind of a reservoir of leftist sentiment down there, and eventually perhaps we were to make some connections. We knew that they existed—we didn't even know who they were and we weren't to pursue them in any way.

*1917: So this is interrupted.*

GW: This is interrupted by the indictment. It was interrupted by two events actually, the indictment and the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, and it's hard to say which one was more—well, I *can* say, I think the Congress was more significant. It was now the end of May of 1956, we'd arrived in February. We were doing what we were supposed to do, and we were actually enjoying it, because we didn't spend all of our evenings in meetings. We were making friends and contacts. We joined the hiking club, had friends in the neighborhood and so on and so forth—and it was not bad, actually it was quite good.

*1917: And the people were relatively liberal?*

GW: No, they were just ordinary folk. I could go up to them and be a bit middle class and there were some people who were in there who were engineers from the TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] and I suppose you might say they were more or less "liberal," but liberalism in 1956, it didn't manifest itself much. We tended not to talk much about politics, and it would come up once in a while, but we never were pushing ourselves in any way. The people we met from work and our neighborhood were working-class people, at least they were not middle class. Class reality didn't always conform to our schema.

We were doing this and it's a rather lovely area and we were both very much interested in hiking and outdoor kind of things so we felt here we were doing our job and at the same time we were having a good time. So it was a good time for us. I look back on that with great pleasure. I was learning things very fast about the South—especially about what I call the "dogwood South" as opposed to the "magnolia South." For instance that everyone carried a pistol in his glove compartment, and how to be polite, and even how to understand what people were saying to me. It was a very interesting experience.

At any rate, just before Memorial Day, someone came down from the national office to see how we were doing and make contact, which we expected from time to time, and this woman came down and she told us about Khrushchev's speech, and that there was agony beginning to develop in the party. This came as quite a shock to us. Everybody else in the party knew about it because it was developing after the February Congress, a little rumor comes out and then a little more of a rumor.

*1917: It was reported in the New York Times, wasn't it?*

GW: It was reported, there were some paraphrases and stuff like that—we didn't get that, eventually the full text of the speech appeared in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, but that was after the events which I'm

now describing. Perhaps we should have read the papers more carefully, but among other things which it was nice to be free of, was the necessity of reading the *New York Times*. Of course we didn't read the *Worker* because we were supposed to be out of contact, so this one came as a big surprise to us: "How can this be?" We just didn't have time to react except that this kind of indecision, this kind of internal crisis was something we had no experience with in the CP. I mean something like this hadn't gone on in the CP since way back in the twenties. We didn't at first realize the magnitude, what kind of effect it could have. We just thought it's another thing and pretty soon there'll be a directive from somewhere and everything will be straightened out.

But we didn't have much time to think about that because I think it was about two days after this woman went back, I got arrested by the FBI on an indictment which had been handed down in Boston. They sent 4 or 5 guys around to the place I was working, and it was all very dramatic, and they searched me and they found a library card. I heard one of them mutter "check this out"—they were going to check what books I'd taken out of the library. I'd gone on a Civil War binge down there because it's an area which encourages that, so I knew what they'd find: a long list of books on the history of the Army of the Cumberland. And I thought well, I hope you guys have a good time doing this research, because there is nothing on explosives or guerrilla warfare. It didn't seem entirely funny at the time but it did have its humor-ous aspects.

*1917: So you were arrested and taken back to Boston?*

GW: Eventually yeah, but I had about 10 days in the county slammer down there.

*1917: Did you ever get any feedback from these new roots you were sinking?*

GW: As a matter of fact we did, and it was really surprising and a very good thing. Neighbors came round to my wife and said, "gee, we heard about your husband." This was all headline stuff, front-page stuff in the local press because nothing ever happens much in Chattanooga. They said it was the biggest thing since Machine Gun Kelly got arrested around there. So all of sudden I was—famous is not the word, notorious perhaps—but friends, neighbors, acquaintances, came around to my wife and expressed sympathy and said, "gee we wish this would all just get straightened out, is there anything we can do for you?" When she said, "well, I think my husband is going to be taken back to Boston so I think I'm going to have to go back there," they said, "well, can we help you move?" This sort of thing. And I was worried about what was going to happen because this was a violent area, although McCarthyism was starting to fade at the time, it was still very much around. But my wife, isolated as she was, and I in the county jail, were much better treated in Tennessee than my co-defendants and their families back in Boston. They had a bit of a time in the Suffolk county jail in Massachusetts, but we had no difficulties with fellow prisoners or neighbors or anything like that.

*1917: How did they look at it, that this was something in your*

*past that was being dragged out?*

GW: I think some people felt it must all just be a mistake because we were nice guys and everybody knew that communists had horns, and so I think that was part of it. I remember one guy in prison saying, "Hey fellas, this guy took on the whole U.S. government!" There is a strong anarchist tendency down there, they've been fighting what they call the big law and the little law (the revenuers), for a long, long time. There was this business of everybody carrying guns, a feeling that the government and the law were not good things, and so I came into jail and they said, "what are you in here for?", and so I'd tell them, and they'd say, "well, what's your bail?", and I had the highest bail of anybody in the jail, so this won a certain amount of prestige. So instead of being about to be beaten up and thrown off the cell blocks, I had status. It was great, I really wasn't expecting that. I was expecting to be race-baited and there wasn't any of that.

*1917: Was it an integrated cell block?*

GW: No, no, just well-segregated.

*1917: Okay, so you went back to Boston.*

GW: Eventually I was taken back to Boston by U.S. marshals. My mother and father bailed me out—they could afford it.

*1917: They had been very disappointed in your choice of careers?*

GW: Oh yes, they didn't approve of any of this at all, and they knew I was going to disappear somewhere, and they didn't like that either. But they did bail me out, and then they put a lot of pressure on me that now is the time to get out of all this, but I said if you want to take your bail money back go ahead but I'm not going to be influenced by that. When I got out, I was immediately put on the board of the New England District of the CP. I think I was attending meetings once in a while when local issues came up before but now I was co-opted onto the board. I was promoted partly because I was a defendant. We went through a very interesting period in Boston, it was a totally new experience for almost everyone except the oldest-time people in the Communist Party, because of the factions which began to develop. There were three noticeable factions plus all kinds of splinterings and whatnot in the party. The party was paralyzed as far as political work was concerned, and there was a period when the rank and file took revenge. @LEAD, 5PT. =

*1917: This is the period after you were brought back to Boston and before you joined the SWP?*

GW: Yes, I came back to Boston in the first weeks of June of 1956, and I was then in Boston and still in the CP, and under indictment of the Smith Act, through the spring of 1957. In the spring of 1957 I formally resigned from the CP with some other people. There were a group of us including one other Smith Act defendant. It was informally defined, but there were maybe about a dozen of us more or less thinking along similar lines. Although the degree of unity was somewhat deceptive in that we were against the same things and put off by the same things that were going on in the CP at the time, when we were out and on our own, we all went separate ways.

Most of them were trying to re-integrate themselves back into the political mainstream, and I was the only one really in that gang who was at all interested in the SWP and Trot-skyism. I didn't join the SWP until I came out here [California], but I was working with them closely, among other things using my position as a Smith Act defendant.

We got back to Boston in the summer of 1956, and we found that the party was in complete disarray, whole branches in New England had simply disappeared. We had a very substantial branch in Lawrence, Massachusetts for example, a working-class branch. It was in the textile industry, it was mainly Italians—the ethnic factor is extremely important in the Communist Party in New England and probably elsewhere, but especially in New England for historical reasons. The Lawrence branch, which had been one of the most stalwart, reliable and proletarian branches of the whole organization, simply disappeared overnight. They would not answer telephone calls, nobody would talk to anybody from the Boston office, much less the national office. They had just disappeared. They were a group which had been able to stand up through the whole business of McCarthy, and had taken a lot of economic and political pressure of one kind or another, but in the face of Khrushchev's speech, they wanted to have nothing more to do with the organization.

*1917: Did they separate as a group or just dissolve?*

GW: They just dissolved, they went their own ways. There may have been small grouplets of people who would meet—the social ties would remain, at least for a while. So I suspect they were meeting, but they were not meeting in the way Trotskyist split-off groups do. If you're a Stalinist and you break with the CP, that's it. Unless you want to join the bourgeoisie in some way, the dominant tendency is to just stop organized politics. You may work in a lot of secondary organizations, you may join the international league for the suppression of man-eating sharks, but you don't continue a revolutionary career. They disappeared, there were other branches like that which disappeared.

In the Boston area things were a little bit better. Some branches were still functioning, but they were not functioning legally under CP discipline. CP discipline simply stopped. You could do and say any damn thing you wanted and there was a tremendous backlog of grievances and resentments against the cadres, against the full-timers, the functionaries, (that was the term we used). I remember a meeting of the Roxbury branch where it became a "speak-bitterness" meeting. There had been a whole series of these, going on for months, and one night it got particularly rough. People were denouncing the leadership for suppression, for its bureaucratic attitudes, for its highhandedness, and so forth, and they get on the phone and they called these functionaries. By this time it's about midnight and everybody's really worked up—"You get down here right now!"

And these guys who had previously imposed themselves, according to their temperaments, more or less brutally—some of them more brutally, some of them less

because they were basically nice guys, and some of them were really nasty—would have to do that. They would have to come down and they'd have to listen. They wouldn't even talk sometimes, just listen to denunciation after denunciation for their rudeness, for their arbitrariness, for their lack of contact with reality, for their brutality to members. In the period from about 1951 to 1955 there had been a lot of brutality because the party thought it was preparing for fascism, so they put a lot of pressure on the members. There had been a big white chauvinism purge around 1954 or 1955, in which people were really savaged, quite unconscionably. All of this came back to roost.

In addition to this, there was an element, I wouldn't say a grouping, because they didn't group, but there was an element in the CP that was desperately waiting for the directive to come, for the national leadership to assert itself, to give the line, to explain what all of this was about, tell us what to do so we can get back to business as usual. No directives came. It was obvious that the national leadership in New York was just as paralyzed as the district leadership in Boston. And these people became increasingly impatient. All their normal expectations of the way party life was conducted, the way the politics of the party worked, were destroyed overnight.

There were people who were saying, "Ah, the Old Man knew what he was talking about—let's not go overboard about this, let's be cautious. This guy Khrushchev, maybe he's one of these guys who's been infiltrated," and so on and so forth. There were a lot of these people, particularly up in one of the industrial towns to the North called Lynn—it was the sort of center of this kind of sentiment. But you couldn't call these what Trotskyists would call "tendencies" because they didn't have that amount of cohesiveness. They were just sort of quirks within the party.

After the 20th Congress comes the revolution in Hungary, so we had a concrete demonstration of Stalinism. People started yelling and screaming about "tank socialism." That caused an even more acute split than the 20th Congress, or at least it exacerbated what was going on, so that the literal screaming and yelling became more severe and more people left: "I can't stand this." No political work was being carried out and nobody was being expelled. And people were doing things that would have got you expelled or denounced on the front page of the *Sunday Worker* a few months before.

As time progressed, it became apparent that there were three basic tendencies within the party both nationally and within New England. One, which looked mainly toward William Z. Foster for leadership, were the hards who wanted to minimalize the effects of the 20th Congress, who gave uncritical support to the Soviet intervention in Hungary. Herbert Aptheker wrote a book called *The Truth About Hungary*. Most of us thought that there wasn't much truth in *The Truth About Hungary*. There was another group that looked mainly to Dennis for leadership. These were people who just sort of wanted to get back to business as usual, make whatever concessions were necessary to hold things together and get back selling the *Daily Worker* and infiltrating the

sunday schools and stuff like that.

The third group wanted to fully develop the ideas which were put forward at the 20th Congress and in some cases to develop them further; to get back into the main-stream and join the Democratic Party. This was in some respects a right tendency within the party. These people found their expression through John Gates, who was the editor of the *Daily Worker*. All these groups were co-existing within the party and the main losses were among the Gatesites because they had the least investment in the party as an organization. They were looking for a real mainstream type of politics. They were “progressive” in the rather invidious sense. They were people who were most willing to drop the whole business of the Marxist-Leninist ideological baggage.

*1917: Were they in general less working-class in composition?*  
 GW: Yes, I think so. There were many exceptions to that but in general, yes. There was a higher working-class content among the Fosterites than among the Gatesites. The Dennis people were pretty amorphous. They tended to be the up-and-coming apparatchiks. They didn't have too much to say: “Everybody keep calm, pay the dues and let's not worry about this stuff.”

*1917: Foster was the classical trade unionist, Gates more a literary...*

GW: I wouldn't say literary. He was the publicist, the editor of the paper. He'd been in Spain, I believe. He had a very prestigious background, but because of the type of politics that the Gates people were projecting, the party apparatus and the name of the party didn't mean much to them, therefore they were more and more willing to get out. This difference was reflected among the defendants in the Smith Act case. We were going to trial. We had to *do* something. At least I thought we had to do something, and my closest friend among the defendants, a guy who I had been working with for a long time, also felt that we had to take some steps.

But when we had these endless meetings of the defendants, it was very clear that the other defendants were so demoralized by the political events that they were not able to do anything. We kept pressing on the defendants: “Let's get some action; let's do some political preparation; we've got to find some lawyers for ourselves,” and so on, and they just were not able to do anything. Since the party apparatus and the discipline broke down, my friend and I were pretty much identified with the Gates tendency. We said, “Okay, we are going to tell you guys something: we no longer consider ourselves to be bound by party discipline. We are going to work on the defense in the way we think is best. We'll let you know what we're doing and we'll make a liaison but don't you go telling us what to do and what not to do, because you guys are abdicating and not doing anything.”

At that time you could get away with it, and we were in different party branches, and we said the same thing to our party branches. In effect, we were resigning from the party at this point. But we said, we're defendants and we're not going to resign, we're not going to do anything public, but we're going to pursue this thing. So he and I proceeded to work hard on organizing the defense. We

went around and got the usual liberal support and tried to raise money. We had some success with that. We contacted the SWP. Some old people in the SWP remembered that I had been involved in getting their defendants on campus and that helped a little bit. But mainly they were looking for any kind of a wedge or opening into the CP so they were delighted to have us come around.

*1917: The SWP in Boston?*

GW: The SWP in Boston. This was all regional. I didn't have anything to do with New York at this point, but there wasn't any point in going to New York because things were just so chaotic. There was nothing to be gained by that at all. I knew some contacts from my student days, from the days before I went to Rhode Island, so I could go around and see them. The SWP had contact with some of the same sorts of people. A lot of these people had just given up on the CP, and didn't want to talk to the CP, but they were willing to talk to the SWP because they had more respect for them. And the SWP threw itself into this thing. So the SWP was doing more for the defense of the Stalinist defendants than the CP was. The CP wasn't doing a damn thing.

So my personal relations with the SWP became amicable. I was impressed with their hard work. They seemed to be a democratic outfit and I could remember the things that I had learned but rejected back in 1944. So my interest in Trotskyism was revived and also I felt that there had to be some really serious explanation for this disaster which had overtaken the world movement. Not too many people, including my closest friends and associates in the CP, seemed to want to pursue that very far. So I started really seriously studying the critiques of the CP.

*1917: This is the first time since you'd been in the CP that it ever troubled you?*

GW: It never troubled me. I was a pious member of the CP but I read Khrushchev's speech when I was in handcuffs on the train back to Boston. This was an epiphany—it really had to be. I couldn't believe that anybody who was serious about the ideology and the science of socialism and what socialism was supposed to represent could fail to try to come to grips with these questions. And yet, when I got back to Boston, it was obvious that most people were not prepared to try to come to grips with it on that level. There were a lot of people who wanted to come to grips with “what did we do wrong politically” and “why are we so isolated,” but not really to deal with what I considered to be the most fundamental questions.

*1917: Like how Stalin had operated in the Soviet Union?*

GW: Like how Stalin had operated within the international movement which would give rise to this kind of stuff. What kind of critique could you make of the historical development of Marxism to account for this political disaster and this moral disaster? There was a moral side to it. People didn't join the CPUSA for careerist reasons. You had to have a moral commitment. You didn't talk about it much because you didn't like to use those terms, but it was very much there, and this was incompatible with what we were learning from the

source of reality, from the source of our ideology, which was Moscow. If anybody else was making that speech, it could have been dismissed, but it was the “pope denouncing the church”—that’s a term I learned in the SWP, we didn’t phrase it that way. The analogy between religious conflict and the organizational/ideological development of Christianity and of the revolutionary Marxist movement seems to me a fruitful analogy. It has limitations like any analogy, but a lot of this has been gone through before. I always had a tendency to use some of the terminology from the fight against Arianist heresy.

I felt that it was really necessary to make as deep a historic analysis of the situation as we were capable of. I didn’t feel very capable of that personally, but I thought there were people around who were interested in that kind of thing and who have got to be committed to doing this, but it was very hard to find them. The person I worked with most closely was a fellow who had been a personal friend of mine. He was willing to go to a certain point but he didn’t want to do it the way I did it, so I felt very isolated at the time.

*1917: You read The Revolution Betrayed?*

GW: Yes, that was one of the first that I read. I don’t think I’d read it before in ‘44, because I didn’t read very seriously then. I was too young and too naive. My whole background wasn’t in that direction. But by this time I was certainly prepared for that. I also read various other standard works by Trotsky and some of the things by Trotskyists. This theoretical analysis was combined with my organizational experience with the SWP. I could see that they were able to function in a situation which was very important for me—to stay out of jail—in a way that the CP wouldn’t. In fact, the CP, even at this point, resented the support that the SWP was giving. We got the SWP to organize meetings on the Boston Smith Act case and they really put themselves into it. There was no great big deal, no roaring thousands, but there were some fairly respectable meetings and there were some fairly respectable people involved. My friend and I were the only defendants and the only spokesmen for the CP that would come there and speak.

*1917: Even among the Gatesites?*

GW: Even among the Gatesites, because the Gatesites had a double hostility to the SWP. In the first place, they had a political hostility because they saw the SWP as hards, as sectarians, and they didn’t want to have anything to do with that kind of stuff; they wanted to get back in the mainstream. Secondly, they had the historic hostility you know, to “spies, saboteurs and wreckers” which all of us in the CP had. So the Gatesites didn’t want to participate.

So, my friend and I would talk and we would speak at these things as defendants and nobody could do anything about that. I made a point at these things of saying publicly that if the CP had given support to the Minneapolis defendants back in 1940, we might not now be in that kind of position, and that we, the CP, had not supported them, but now the SWP was supporting us. They liked that. Most of the CP did not like it, but they couldn’t do anything about it.

*1917: Even with that there was no move to get rid of you?*

GW: You couldn’t expel anybody for *anything* in the CP of this period. Believe me, for *nothing*. What was happening was, however, that although the Gates group had a clear majority in the New England district in this period, and probably in the whole party, we were losing by attrition, because the Fosterites had a reason for hanging on. The center people had nowhere else to go, whereas we had other alternatives. The result was that gradually we became weaker except that the Russians kept coming to our aid by invading Hungary and by doing other horrendous things. And there were these individuals who would make these dramatic flops. There was one guy who came from Minnesota. He started out as an organizer of the Farmer-Labor Party; he was sent to Moscow to the Lenin school. He was a real old-timer and very hard guy, one of these iron cadre types. He started off by saying, “the Old Man knows what he’s talking about,” and within one week, shortly after the Hungarian Revolution, he said, “burn the books.” There were other people who made that kind of flop. A lot of it became very personal, very subjective, very psychological.

*1917: Did you, as a dissident, attempt to organize any meetings like what we would consider tendency or factional meetings? If you’d been recruited by the SWP and you wanted to come out of the CP with some kind of faction, do you think anything could have been built?*

GW: I doubt it. There was too much disarray and too much lack of any kind of coherence. I heard later on in the SWP that there were some other people elsewhere who were willing to at least talk to the SWP, but as far as I know, I was the only one that felt that Trotskyism had anything to do except cast a certain sidelight on the events.

*1917: You didn’t have very much of a base left from Providence or Rhode Island?*

GW: No, I was pretty much cut off from that because in Rhode Island the people I’d been personally closest to, with one or two exceptions, turned out to be Gatesites. They just quit. “The hell with this.” They were willing to help me personally, but they weren’t going to have anything more to do with politics. One of the leading guys in there who had been a pretty close friend of mine became a very hard Fosterite. When I went down there to talk to him, he told me that I was an enemy of the working class, a renegade and a traitor. There were differences. There was nothing left for me in Rhode Island. I had better contacts in Boston and I had lots of friends up there, but I don’t think it would have been possible to really organize. We made a few attempts to set up some forums to discuss these things but...

*1917: You as a Gatesite, not on behalf of the SWP...*

GW: Working more as a Gatesite. I had my own contradictions because there was a contradiction between the Gatesite politics and the SWP’s politics and I became more and more aware of this as time went on, but I was still trying to feel my way through all this kind of stuff and all my stylistic and personal ties were with the Gatesite group. At the same time, it seemed to me that



Trotskyism provided the only viable critique historically of Stalinism. And here was the SWP doing all these good things on an empirical basis, and I always have had a tendency, I think, to be perhaps too much influenced by the empirical situation and this keeps manifesting itself and it manifested itself there.

*1917: Was the SWP fairly aggressive in terms of contacting you? Did they have people who were assigned to talk to you?*

GW: I don't know if there were people assigned, but there were people who did it. The main person I knew there was the head of the Boston party—Larry Trainor. He was an old Irishman and a printer, and he was not only not an intellectual, he was anti-intellectual. There were many things he didn't understand but he was a very good man, he had a good political sense and I was impressed with him. I was impressed with most of the people I met in the SWP. On the other hand, I was also unfavorably impressed by what seemed to me to be a certain amount of inefficiency and dithering that they would get into.

*1917: Over what? Just in terms of organizing meetings?*

GW: Taking twice as long to come to some kind of decision to do something fairly simple as it would take in the CP. My subsequent experience with the SWP confirmed it—there was a certain kind of incompetence in the SWP which didn't exist in the CP.

*1917: Is that a function of the lack of democracy in the CP?*

GW: No...well, possibly, but I think mainly it was a function of the historical isolation of the SWP. They hadn't had the experience of mass organizations which the CP had and therefore their main interest was in other things. They didn't know how to run a trade-union fraction the way the CP did. The CP, by god, they knew how to run a trade-union fraction. I was in a couple of them and, the politics might have been bad, but things got done. The SWP was never any match for them. I'm really getting now into a later period which I'd like to come back to.

*1917: In your trade-union experience as a CPer, did you ever confront any SWPers?*

GW: No.

*1917: Okay, so we are at a point now when you're obviously gravitating to the SWP, your connection to the CP becomes more and more tenuous. Did you ever finally go in and hand in a resignation statement, or did you stop going to meetings?*

GW: Yes I did. When the case was dropped. This was the tag end of the whole Smith Act epoch, and after a couple of Supreme Court decisions, actually they were California decisions, the government decided that they would have to expose too many stoolies, and they would have to prove more than they were prepared to prove, so they dropped the indictments. As soon as they dropped the indictments, my friend and I resigned, formally. Although, we had been de facto out of the CP, that is, out of its discipline, before that. The difference was that we now publicly stated our opposition to the CP and wrote letters, and made some public denunciations of what we saw as Stalinist.

*1917: Did you write letters to the Militant?*

GW: I don't know where exactly, but they ended up in print one place or another. Probably in the *Militant*, and I think we put some leaflets out. At this point we thought we were at war with the CP. We had felt we were before, but because of the Smith Act situation, that had to be muted. But at this point, we were in a political war with the CP.

*1917: You weren't a Trotskyist and your friend was even less of a Trotskyist, so your framework was what, that the CP was hopelessly bureaucratic? What was your critique?*

GW: He and I both wanted to make a fight for control of the CP through the 1957 convention. I think it was in February. We thought that if the Gatesites could take over the CP, that perhaps it could be transformed into a decent organization. I think, looking back on it, that this was a utopian attitude, and I think we halfway felt that at the time, and therefore we had no success at this. After that convention, the CP began to go back to business-as-usual. They began to get it together, and things began to function a little more. And we could see the period where this struggle could successfully be carried on was over, so we resigned. We were getting no support from the other Gates people. They wanted nothing more to do with it.

*1917: You and he were sending these letters. Was there anyone else doing this?*

GW: Yes. There were a lot of people doing this sort of thing too. We were in touch with some of them, but it was a very individual thing.

*1917: You separated from your first wife in the middle of all this. Did that have political roots, or was it mainly personal?*

GW: On the surface it had no political roots, it was a personal thing. Actually, since our mutual dedication to the CP and to its politics was one of the things which held us together, it knocked one of the props out from under the marriage.

*1917: She didn't become a hard Fosterite and denounce you?*

GW: No, it was nothing like that. We were pretty much in agreement except that she was through with politics and she knew I wasn't. She could see all the signs that I was going to go on for a while.

*1917: So, you and your friend were out of the CP, and you at least were sort of in the orbit of the Boston branch of the SWP.*

GW: This was the opening of what was called a regroupment period. It began to be possible for different socialist groups, including the CP, to at least talk to other groups. And we participated to an extent in that. Nothing much ever came of this, but this occupied my political energy and also my friend's. We were still pretty close politically. I was making financial contributions to the SWP by this time, which is a form of commitment. But I was still trying to study things. Someone sent me a Shachtmanite piece. I think, from other people, that the FBI was sending these things around, which I don't mean as a criticism of the Shachtmanites. It wasn't their fault, but I believe the FBI was sending these things around. It was a polemic against the idea that the Soviet Union was, in any sense, a workers state. The orthodox Trotskyists were saying, this is a degenerated workers state, and the

Shachtman-ites were saying, it is bureaucratically collectivist, and the Soviet Union is not part of the solution but rather part of the problem. I really tried to think that one through. That perhaps disturbed me more than anything else that I was getting in terms of the direction I really wanted to go, which was toward the SWP. But I managed to overcome that.

*1917: Did you ever intersect the Shachtmanites?*

GW: No. I didn't know what the Shachtmanites had at

the time in Boston, they didn't seem to be around much. Essentially, the regroupment that I recall was a matter of the SWP, various Stalinist and ex-Stalinist groupings and possibly some social democrats. I don't recall ever having any contact with the Shachtmanites other than just a literary thing, until I came out here [California]. Here they were very active.

[TO BE CONTINUED]