

Will the Real Political Bandits Please Stand Up? Truth or Consequences

The following is a letter to *Workers Vanguard*, newspaper of the Spartacist League/US, responding to an article slandering the Bolshevik Tendency.

16 December 1989

Comrades:

In replying to a *Workers Vanguard* (WV) polemic against the Workers League for its conduct in the Mark Curtis case, the 14 July 1989 *Bulletin* repeats several charges leveled against the Spartacist League by the Bolshevik Tendency. In your rejoinder ("Why Should Anyone Believe David North?," WV, 13 October 1989) you seize upon this opportunity to lump the BT with the Workers League (WL), citing the *Bulletin* article as evidence of our supposed shared anti-Sovietism, hostility to the black working class, bloodthirstiness, appetite for provocation and "petty criminal mentality."

Our attitude toward the Workers League has long been a matter of public record. We regard this unsavory gaggle of Gerry Healy's erstwhile American acolytes as one of the most perfidious examples of small-group psychosis and political banditry in the recent history of the U.S. left—exceeding even your own. Having considered all the available evidence, we concluded that Iowa SWP activist Mark Curtis was indeed the victim of a police frame-up. We endorsed his defense campaign a year and a half ago. The WL's attempt to bolster the prosecutor's case is one more episode in its decades-long, pathological crusade to destroy the SWP by any and every unprincipled means, including slander, cop-baiting and complicity with the capitalist courts.

Yet nothing prevents even the most unscrupulous political operators from deploying the truth against opponents when it suits their purposes. How many times during the 1930s did the social-democratic and bourgeois press make use of Trotsky's writings to discredit the Soviet Union? And how many times did the Stalinists offer these citations from Trotsky in the bourgeois press as proof of his "hatred of Soviet Russia" and complicity with the imperialist powers? You now employ this same Stalinist technique of guilt by involuntary association against the Bolshevik Tendency because the WL, which is not particularly selective about the means it uses to discredit opponents, has found in our literature certain facts more damning to the Spartacist League than any lies it could invent. We will no more be deterred from publishing the truth about your organization because it can be cited by rightists, reformists or political bandits than Trotsky was from telling the truth about Stalinism because it could be used by the bourgeoisie for its own counterrevolutionary aims.

Your reply to the WL refers to the "Bolshevik Tendency's grotesque slanders of the Spartacist League," while studiously avoiding mention of exactly what "slanders" you refer to, let alone attempting to deny them. Indeed, the only specific charge which you take

up is from an article in 1917 (not cited in the WL polemic) which compares the internal regimes of Gerry Healy and James Robertson ("The Robertson School of Party Building," 1917 No. 1). In this piece we noted that whereas Healy routinely had internal opponents beaten up, "This is something which the SL is not guilty of to our knowledge." You wax indignant because we also noted that "intimations of such appetites are increasingly common" among your leadership, but you refrain from commenting on the examples of such impulses which we quoted from a former leading member of the Spartacist League/Britain. He asked: "Perhaps you could explain why Len told [a former member] to remember what the Provos do to 'people like him.' Or why Ed felt moved to tell [another member] that 'if we were in [another country] we would beat you up.'" Reasonable people can only interpret remarks of this sort as intimating an appetite for the kind of violations of workers democracy which gave the Healyites such a deservedly bad name.

Your reply to the Northites is designed to give your readers the impression that the BT only makes vague insinuations about the SL. One would never suspect from your article that we have made a number of specific, concrete allegations concerning violations of Trotskyist principle, democratic centralism and proletarian morality on the part of your National Chairman, James Robertson, and his sycophantic clique. Several of these highly specific charges are repeated in the WL polemic. Yet you deliberately choose to ignore them. If these more specific accusations were false, you could justly indict us not only for making insinuations, but (what is far worse), for concocting outright lies about your organization. But such an indictment would necessarily involve answering our charges directly—something you are not prepared to do for one very compelling reason: they are true.

In recent years, the SL leadership has found it necessary to give its members multiple choice tests in order to upgrade their general knowledge. To enhance public knowledge about the Spartacist League, we invite you to take the following "true or false" test, consisting of the specific allegations from our journal, 1917, which were picked up by the *Bulletin* (14 July 1989):

1. "In 1984, the *Workers Vanguard* carried a black-bordered death notice for Yuri Andropov, the KGB chief who played a major role in the butchering of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, claiming he 'made no overt betrayals on behalf of imperialism.'"

T__ F__

2. "Some Spartacist members who participated in a 1982 anti-Klan demonstration in Washington, DC billed themselves as the 'Yuri Andropov Brigade.'"

T__ F__

We are certain that even you would have no difficulty answering "true" to the above two questions, since the

answers can be verified by consulting the appropriate back issues of *Workers Vanguard*. Publicly unacknowledged to date, however, are the following allegations contained in the *Bulletin* concerning the internal life of the SL:

3. "...the leadership has posted photographs of General Jaruzelski in the national office."

T__ F__

4. "Spartacist founder James Robertson had a six-figure summer home built [we said "bought"—BT] for himself on a marina in the San Francisco Bay Area, financed by a special one-time assessment on the membership. 'Although the house is technically the property of the organization, it is clearly intended for the personal use of Robertson....'"

T__ F__

5. "'Adjoining his private office in the group's New York headquarters is a plush-carpeted playroom specifically designed for the nocturnal escapades that occupy an ever-increasing share of the National Chairman's attention.'"

T__ F__

6. "'Robertson has also had a hot tub installed in his extensive two-storied Manhattan apartment'."

T__ F__

Like many other present and former SL members, we have personal knowledge that the answer to all the above questions is "true." We predict that you will not print this letter in its entirety. To do so would mean confirming or denying the above charges in print; to do either would be equally damaging to the reputation of the SL leadership. To deny them would contradict the direct experience of every SL member and sympathizer who saw the picture of Jaruzelski (clearly on display for months in the maintenance department of your New York headquarters), who contributed to Robertson's house, who spent many hours constructing the play-

room and installing the hot tub. A direct denial would expose your leadership as cynical, unmitigated liars in the eyes of all these members and sympathizers.

If, on the other hand, you were to confirm these allegations, and say that, as head of a supposedly Marxist organization, Robertson is fully entitled to enjoy a materially privileged lifestyle at your members' expense, and that Jaruzelski deserves a place of honor on your walls, you would forever forfeit any claim to be taken seriously as a Trotskyist organization, and reveal yourselves to the world as the degenerate personality cult you have become. It would then be highly improbable that any rational human being would ever want to support or join the Spartacist League.

You therefore resort to the only dodge available to a culprit on the spot: to divert attention from the accusations by sowing confusion and defaming the accuser. An ordinary gangster might attempt to impugn the reputation of a witness against him by calling the latter a rapist or a drug addict; you respond to the testimony of the Bolshevik Tendency with a battery of epithets specifically designed to discredit us in the eyes of leftists and Trotskyists: anti-Soviet renegades, trade-union bureaucrats, racists, agent-provocateurs, etc. And just in case these specifically leftist terms of opprobrium do not have the desired effect, a few more ordinary accusations—e.g., "petty criminal"—are thrown in for good measure. These tactics—all in the worst traditions of Gerry Healy and David North—should prompt the more thoughtful readers of *Workers Vanguard* to ask themselves: "Why should anyone believe James Robertson?"

Yours for workers democracy,
 Jim Cullen (SL Member 1981-86)
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 for the Bolshevik Tendency