

IG: Ex-Robertsonites in Denial Willful Blindness

In June 1996, the Spartacist League (SL) purged four long-time cadres: Jan Norden, editor-in-chief for 23 years of the group's newspaper, *Workers Vanguard*; his companion and de-facto WV managing editor, Marjorie Stamberg; Negrete, who headed the SL's Mexican affiliate, the Grupo Espartaquista de Mexico (GEM); and Negrete's companion, Socorro, an 18-year member of the Spartacist League. Norden was the most prominent SL cadre ever purged in the group's history; Stamberg joined the SL in the early 1970s, and was a member of its central committee; Negrete and Socorro were their political allies. Immediately following the purge, the International Communist League (ICL—the SL's international) abruptly broke recently established fraternal relations with the Liga Quarta-Internacionalista do Brasil/Luta Metalúrgica (LQB/LM). The break took place because the Brazilians refused to associate themselves with the purge of Norden and Negrete, who had been their chief ICL contacts, without hearing both sides and reading the documents.

In the year and a half since the purge, the four have refused to be driven out of far-left politics. They have constituted themselves as the "Internationalist Group" (IG), established fraternal links with the LQB/LM, and have won the adherence of two former members of the GEM who initially went along with the Norden purge, but later regretted it. The IG has thus far published three thick issues of *The Internationalist*, with coverage of political developments in half a dozen countries. In their press, in Internet postings, leaflets, and one lengthy bulletin, they have systematically and painstakingly refuted the charges leveled against them by the Spartacist League. Yet, despite its political stamina and feverish activity, the IG has to date proved unequal to the tasks that, for a serious revolutionary group, must come before all others: accounting for its origins and justifying its existence as a separate organization.

Launching a new organization with only a handful of people and a fraternal group thousands of miles away is a difficult undertaking. Any intelligent person contemplating membership in such an organization would want to know why it parted company with a much larger parent outfit whose politics appear nearly identical. The IG has furnished an account of sorts, but, particularly for those familiar with the evolution of the Spartacist League over the past two decades, their version is not plausible.

Beginning with the "Declaration of the External Tendency of the iSt," issued 15 years ago in 1982, we have chronicled the degeneration of the Spartacist League from a genuine democratic-centralist Trotskyist propaganda group into a bureaucratized and politically erratic organization centered on a single individual, the group's National Chairman, James Robertson. We described this degeneration as a slow process, taking place over a period of years, and becoming complete in all important respects by the early 1980s. The techniques employed by Robertson to maintain his regime—psychological gang bangs, pre-emptive strikes against potential opponents, frame-up trials and cop-baiting—have all been documented in our literature.

Norden and his comrades are the latest victims of the Robertson regime. But the indisputable fact is that, for most of the same 15 years, the founders of the Internationalist

Group functioned as Robertson's willing accomplices. With perhaps less enthusiasm than many hardcore hacks, but dutifully nonetheless, they deployed against others—most notably the IBT—many of the same techniques today being used to anathematize them. Norden, in his capacity as editor of *Workers Vanguard*, played an active part in concocting slanders against us. Yet—how much out of a conscious desire to save face, how much out of genuine self-delusion, we cannot know—the IG cadres have stubbornly resisted any re-evaluation or criticism of their own political past.

Thus the Internationalist Group seeks to defend itself against the slanders and unprincipled attacks of the Spartacist League, while at the same time uncritically defending all previous uses of similar techniques by the Robertson regime against others. This stance, in turn, requires them to make a highly implausible claim: that, right up until the fight against the "Norden clique," the SL remained a healthy Trotskyist organization; and that, in a matter of months, this same organization was somehow transformed into a bureaucratic nightmare, employing methods that the IG itself compares to those of Stalin, without a murmur of opposition from anyone beside the luckless four. This flies in the face of both elementary logic and the facts.

An Improbable Account

The Internationalist Group's version of the SL's degeneration goes roughly as follows: after the collapse of the USSR and the deformed workers' states of Eastern Europe, the ICL fell increasingly into the grip of a defeatist mood. Leading elements of the organization began to view the working class as being in long-term retreat, and therefore expected that opportunities for intervention in the class struggle would be few and far between. They concluded that the best the ICL could do under these circumstances was to keep itself intact, issue propaganda of an abstract and passive character, and wait for better times. This shift was embodied by a new leadership, headed by Alison Spencer (a.k.a. Parks). A former leader of the Spartacus Youth, Spencer increasingly took over the reins from Robertson, who went into semi-retirement in California in the late 1980s. This new leadership is, according to the IG, "lacking any experience whatsoever in the class struggle," has an "insecure footing in Marxism," and is "heavily shaped by the stultifying Reagan and post-Reagan years in North America."

The IG contends that the historic pessimism of the SL's new leaders led them to view with suspicion the attempts of Norden and company to pursue real opportunities in the class struggle, and to brand such initiatives as opportunism and attempts to get rich quick. This growing hostility culminated in their purge. Robertson, though initially reluctant, ultimately went along with the anti-Norden campaign in order not to undermine the new leadership. The new SL leadership's abstentionist mentality is, according to the IG, manifested above all in the "cowardly retreat from the class struggle" represented by the rupture of fraternal relations with the LQB/LM. The ICL broke relations just as the LQB/LM was facing repression from the Brazilian state for waging a campaign to expel the police from a union they

led in Volta Redonda, an industrial town not far from Rio de Janeiro. In the course of the Norden purge, the IG argues, democratic-centralist norms were violated, their membership rights were trampled on, deliberately false accusations were leveled at them by the leadership, frame-up trials were conducted and outright lies were printed in *Workers Vanguard*—all, according to the IG, for the *first time* in the history of the Spartacist League.

A Few Comparisons

While this version of events contains many elements of truth, it is fundamentally false. The remarkable similarity between the IG's account of what happened to them, and our descriptions of previous purges, published over ten years earlier, is, in itself, enough to disprove the IG's claim that the SL regime trampled on internal party democracy for the first time in 1996.

Because Negrete, the head of the Mexican group (GEM), was thought to be a Norden ally, the SL sent a special delegation to Mexico to purge the section. Here is Negrete's description:

"Having gone through the 'Brazil/Mexico fight,' I can state categorically that the current campaign involves a chain of willful fabrications. The fight blew up when Camila and I had questions about significantly inaccurate statements on Brazil in an I.S. mailing cover letter. At the same time as some of these statements were then explicitly corrected, a story was fabricated that I had behaved as a 'sexist bully' towards Camila (which Camila herself denied was true) and browbeaten her into posing the questions she put in writing. When witnesses said and wrote that this is not what happened, not only was the content of what they said ignored, but they were smeared as cliquists, personalists and anti-internationalists. At the same time as requests by Socorro and myself for a formal investigation of the charge were rejected out of hand, the lie was not only repeated but inflated into a supposed pattern."

—*From a Drift Toward Abstentionism to Desertion from the Class Struggle*

In the first issue of this journal, published in 1986, we recounted another case where a Spartacist cadre who had fallen into disfavor with the regime was accused of "sexual manipulation:"

"When the accused inquired how this charge could be made when he denied it, and all his purported victims denied it, he was informed that this was the *worst* kind of manipulation—it had been done so skillfully that, even under considerable party pressure, the victims themselves couldn't see what happened! Such is the Alice-in-Wonderland quality of the 'richly democratic' internal life of the Spartacist tendency. Sexual manipulation, like everything else in the SL, means exactly what the leadership wants it to mean."

—"The Robertson School of Party Building" 1917 No. 1

In another document, Norden and Stamberg describe their own interactions with Spencer, the SL's newly appointed leader:

"When we objected to the multiple inaccuracies and unsupported outrageous claims, Parks [Spencer] flew into a rage and proceeded to purge first Negrete and Socorro from Mexico and then Norden from the I.S. In both cases, invented charges were tossed around with abandon, and when one didn't fly it was simply replaced by a new one. This mud-slinging is an all-too familiar witchhunting technique, based on the assumption that eventually

something will stick or the targets will tire of scraping off the slime."

—*Op cit.*

Negrete recounts that during the Mexican purge:

"Once again the grossly distorted picture was backed up by a series of demonstrably false statements. Yet each falsehood, once it collapsed, gave way to a new one.

"The above is only a sample of the false statements piled one on top of the other in that fight. Yet a number of well-meaning comrades have urged that all these 'details' be overlooked in favor of the 'big picture.' But...in this case the 'big picture' is made up of a lot of 'little' lies and fabrications, which keep getting bigger."

—*Ibid.*

In their description of the same purge, Norden and Stamberg write:

"In the opening statement for the I.S. delegation to the April 14 GEM meeting, Kidder began by reeling off a list of the names and ranks of eight full or alternate members of the IEC who had written documents on the fight, then saying: 'You don't have to take anybody's word for it in our organization, leadership or not. Yet comrade Negrete would have you believe that these comrades who together represent about 150 to 200 years in our international tendency have it all wrong, don't really know the facts, are simply engaging in gratuitous insults against him. What kind of organization is Negrete saying that you have joined, comrades?'"

—*Ibid.*

Compare the above accounts to our own portrayal of a typical SL *auto-da-fé*, written in 1985:

"Here's how it works in the SL. A meeting is called where the designated comrade is called to account for mistakes which he allegedly committed. Each item on the bill of particulars is grossly exaggerated and extrapolated; perfidious motivations (political and/or personal) are attributed. Incidental personal criticisms of the individual's mannerisms, lifestyle or demeanor are thrown in for good measure. Those leading the attack typically do a good deal of histrionic screaming and posturing in order to create the proper emotionally-charged atmosphere. The assembled membership is expected to provide the chorus: repeating and embellishing on the accusations....There is no beating the rap. If you can prove that some of the allegations are false, new ones are quickly invented. Or you are charged with using 'lawyer's arguments' and attempting to obscure the overall picture by quibbling over 'details'....After all, if you don't agree with the charges, then you *must* think the campaign against you is a bureaucratic atrocity."

—"The Road to Jimstown" (1985)

The parallels between these accounts leaves two possibilities open: either 1) our accusations were false when we made them in 1985-86, but the SL leadership used our literature as a how-to guide, from which they culled the techniques that were deployed for the first time against Norden, Stamberg, Negrete and Socorro in 1996; or 2) far from being new, these weapons had been part of the leadership's arsenal long before the ill-fated four took their turn as targets.

The Wohlforth School of Cop-Baiting

The Internationalist Group's claim that, in the wake of their expulsion, the Spartacist press for the first time besmirched its formerly spotless reputation for veracity is as

preposterous as their claim to be the first victims of bureaucratic treatment in the SL. *The Internationalist* No. 2 laments:

“Founded in 1971, the Spartacist League’s *Workers Vanguard* acquired a reputation for accuracy and the hard-hitting integrity of a newspaper seeking to present the program of revolutionary Marxism unblunted by adaptation to the lying ideology of capitalist society. Yet for going on a year now, *WV* has been ripping this hard-earned reputation to shreds.”

The same article waxes particularly indignant over the fact that, in *Workers Vanguard*:

“vituperation is a device to cover up the inability to answer us politically. We have charged that the ICL leadership committed a betrayal in Brazil, that its growing tendency to abstentionism led to desertion from a key class battle. The response of *Workers Vanguard* is to say...that the IG is ‘for sale.’ This is a political response?”

The Internationalist aptly compares the *WV* allegations with the infamous smear tactics of the Healyite Workers League of the 1960s:

“We are compelled to ask: did the new *WV* crib from [former Workers League leader Tim] Wohlforth its smear job against the Internationalist Group? Particularly when we compare the end of the *WV* No. 663 article with the peroration of Wohlforth’s classic hack job, which claimed of Spartacist:

“Precisely because it is motivated by subjective considerations and lives particularly on its deep hatred of the Trotskyist movement, its role is very much that of a gun for hire. Neither tradition nor any objective consideration places any limit on what this group can and will do.”

“What was *vile slander* from Wohlforth’s pen is no less so when, in almost exactly the same language, the hobbled post-purge *WV* spews it out against us today....This is a hoary method: if you can’t justify voting for imperialist war credits in World War I, accuse Lenin of taking German gold; if you can’t answer Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinist degeneration, accuse him of working for the Gestapo, the French Deuxième Bureau and the Mikado; if you can’t answer revolutionary criticism, accuse the critic of being ‘for sale,’ or a ‘gun for hire’.”

The IG wants its readers to believe that such politically corrupt practices are completely unprecedented in the history of the SL. But those who peruse the 4 October 1985 issue of *WV*, with Norden as editor, will find us smeared as “anti-Spartacists for hire”:

“Those who are guided by intense subjective malice as a political program are just asking to be someone’s tool, witting or unwitting (sometimes both)....applying the criterion *cui bono* (who benefits) to the ET/BT suggests answers ranging from the merely unsavory to the downright sinister.”

Was *WV*, again during Norden’s tenure, cribbing from Wohlforth two years later in its article “Garbage Doesn’t Walk by Itself—What Makes BT Run?” (15 May 1987) when it wrote:

“The whole tone of the BT recalls nothing so much as the insinuating style associated with the FBI’s infamous CO-INTELPRO....

“Ex-members of the socialist movement do sometimes bear malice toward the organizations that ‘failed’ them. But people who voluntarily leave even very bad organizations normally find that their grievances recede as they go on with their lives. Hostility doesn’t make a program and ex-membership in a party doesn’t provide a sufficient reason for publishing a newspaper....The BT is manifestly

an assemblage of garbage....But to take that refuse heap and make it move like a loathsome living thing requires something more, an animating principle like the electric charge Dr. Frankenstein used to imbue his monster with life.”

Or perhaps the IG’s memory goes back at least as far as 1990, when the ICL published *Trotskyism: What It Isn’t and What It Is!*, which alleged:

“Cold War II also produced defectors and renegades from our organization. Today they call themselves the Bolshevik Tendency and the Gruppe Vierte Internationale [forerunner of Gruppe Spartakus, the German section of the IBT—ed]. Based in North America, the BT are parasites who often will put forward a parody of our positions...while staging repeated provocations against our organization. As for the BT’s own political positions, besides hatred of the Soviet Union, these highly dubious provocateurs appear to dislike American blacks, are solicitous of Zionism and praise the indiscriminant [sic] mass killings of Americans. Of the state agencies in the world only the Mossad, the Israeli secret police, has similar appetites....”

These are only the most outrageous examples of cop baiting in the Spartacist press. For reasons of space, we must refrain from citing numerous passages containing such epithets directed against us as: “bureaucrat,” “red-baiter,” “wrecker,” “wife beater,” “petty criminal,” and, most recently, “scab.” To sling mud at the IG, the SL had no need to take a leaf out of Wohlforth’s book; they had only to consult the bound volumes of *Workers Vanguard* for the past ten or twelve years.

In general the SL does not find it necessary to aim such wild slanders at those who stand at greater distance from its own professed politics. The IG and ourselves have been the main objects of these unscrupulous tactics because, as former “insiders,” our criticisms hit home in a way that those of other opponents generally do not. And, as the IG explained, “if you can’t answer Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinist degeneration, accuse him of working for the Gestapo.”

We should, however, note that the SL has on occasion employed similarly unprincipled tactics against other leftists. One example was fully documented in *WV* 26 July 1985, when a well-known supporter of the state-capitalist League for the Revolutionary Party (LRP) was cop-baited from the platform by a guest speaker at a public meeting of the New York SL. When he “incredibly” demanded that the SL “uphold his purported honor as a socialist,” the SL interpreted this as evidence that: “He wanted us to have to escort him out, which we did.”

The Real Story

The Robertsonites’ allegation that the Internationalist Group are “Pabloites of the second mobilization,” searching for “social forces other than the proletariat and vehicles other than a Leninist vanguard party” (*Workers Vanguard*, 5 July 1996) is clearly no more applicable to the Norden group than to the Spartacist League itself. But the IG have been unable to provide a plausible explanation of why they were driven out of the SL. Their literature puts heavy emphasis on the “cowardly retreat from the class struggle” in Brazil, which culminated in the breaking of relations with the LQB/LM. There was indeed a cowardly retreat with respect to the Brazilian group, but this was *not* the cause of the Norden purge. In fact, the “anti-Norden” struggle in the Spartacist League began more than a year earlier, when the

SL leadership claimed to have discovered evidence of “Stalinophilia” in a speech given by Norden at Berlin’s Humboldt University. This accusation, in turn, came as the culmination of tensions that had been brewing for a number of years.

It is always tidier, for public purposes, to locate the reasons for a split in readily comprehensible differences of views or principle, rather than in the petty, squalid internal machinations of a cultist political organization. But facts are stubborn things. It is to such machinations that we must turn to understand the real reasons for the Norden purge.

An inevitable byproduct of the Spartacist League’s degeneration was the depoliticizing of the rank and file. Political wisdom was increasingly attributed to the leader alone. Yet the editorial board of *Workers Vanguard* remained the one vestige of the SL’s intensely political, revolutionary past. It had over the years drawn to itself many of the SL’s brightest, most literate, and most informed members, and political discussion remained an operational necessity for putting out the paper. It was precisely for this reason that the SL’s maximum leader, James Robertson, regarded the WV editorial board as a nest of potential oppositionists. Where political discussion occurs, there is always the possibility of arriving at conclusions other than those of Number One. The collective trashing of the editorial board, usually before a meeting of the New York local, had therefore almost become a ritual by the time the “Norden group” was finally expelled.

At Robertson’s instigation, Norden would be taken to task for being insensitive to the needs of people who worked under him, driving the production staff too hard, and deeming himself to be above collective discipline (read: obedience to Robertson). In accordance with his usual practice, Robertson sought to exploit the legitimate grievances of Norden’s subordinates. Norden is a workaholic, who did on occasion impose a frenzied pace upon his staff. But in this respect he was hardly more culpable than other leading SLers, whose methods were never so closely scrutinized nor so loudly and frequently denounced before the organization as a whole. Robertson likes to appear before the membership as their defender against abusive, small-time bureaucrats. Both the Tsar and Stalin used to do the same; it’s good public relations.

These ritual denunciations of the *Workers Vanguard* ed board would usually end with a reluctant capitulation on Norden’s part. In 1984, one such episode resulted in the appointment of a Robertson-loyal “editor-in-chief” who, although neither a political heavyweight nor an experienced writer or editor, was given final authority over the paper on closing night, when Norden was barred from the WV offices. He was forced instead to sit by himself in a room on another floor until production was completed, maintaining only telephone contact with the rest of the WV staff. One senior member of the editorial board compared this treatment to that meted out by Mao during the Cultural Revolution to “disloyal” party officials, who were paraded in public wearing dunce caps. And in a stroke truly reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution’s “big character posters,” which were aimed at Mao’s enemies, a poster denouncing Norden was hung in the SL offices. With the passage of time, things gradually returned to normal in the WV bullpen. But by then the organization was well accustomed to the sight of Norden in the pillory.

Several years later, when Robertson moved to California, the scene was set for a succession struggle at the Spartacist League’s New York headquarters. The *Workers Van-*

guard collective was now the most cohesive group of senior cadres left in New York, and Norden was the most politically authoritative figure among them. He was therefore the most likely candidate to replace Robertson as head of the SL. Robertson, however, was determined to prevent such an outcome. Even from the comfortable semi-retirement of his marina-side Bay Area house, the supreme leader was not prepared to relinquish control of the group he had trained, through years of “fights” and purges, in the habits of unconditional obedience to him. He was bent on maintaining control from afar by means of his lieutenants. Norden was too brash, too independent, and too full of his own ideas to serve as Robertson’s New York stand-in.

The IG account says that Norden and Co. were purged in order to consolidate the “new leadership” headed by Alison Spencer. But to what or whom does Spencer owe her new-found leading role? To her profound Marxist knowledge? To her immense popularity among the rank and file? In fact, Spencer is a reasonably competent, intelligent and very ambitious apparatchik, but her talents are almost exclusively of the organizational-instrumental variety; she has never been particularly overburdened by theoretical or political concerns. She was appointed by Robertson because she possessed the one qualification that he valued above all others: total subservience. But, though completely loyal to Robertson, Spencer is too young and politically untutored to possess Robertson’s level of authority, especially in the eyes of the older cadres. Her position could therefore only be consolidated by humbling, or, if necessary, driving out those who would stand in her way. Norden was the biggest such obstacle.

The beginnings of this succession struggle are well documented in a 1993 SL internal bulletin entitled *The Struggle to Forge a Collective Leadership* (read: *The Struggle to Preserve Robertson’s Dictatorship*). Spencer fired the opening shot when, picking up on cues from Robertson, she criticized as insufficiently earnest (read: strident and cliché-ridden) a perfectly unobjectionable WV front-page article on Clinton’s bombing of Baghdad (2 July 1993). Spencer also asserted that the whole issue of the paper was “the worst...we’ve produced in a long time.” Both Norden and the director of party publications, Liz Gordon, responded that, while neither the article nor the issue were top quality, there was basically nothing wrong with them, especially considering the high level of organizational activity at the time, and the multiple demands being made on their time.

From this point on, the battle was joined, as one Robertson loyalist after another rose to denounce Norden and Gordon as “defensive,” “turf-conscious” and “cliquist,” and as attempting to usurp the prerogatives of the admittedly weak Political Bureau and International Secretariat. The climax was yet another collective trashing before the New York local of the members of the WV ed board who had dared to contradict a Robertson-appointed “leader.” The shrill and strident Spencer led the charge. As a result, Gordon resigned as publications director, and Norden and Stamberg, though allowed to continue at their respective WV posts, were once again humiliated.

The Anointing of Alison

In the SL’s printed record of this fight, one episode in particular stands out. This is a report from a Robertson loyalist, Bruce A., on a conversation he had with Norden and Stamberg. Norden told Bruce that: “Jim [Robertson] asked me if I thought I could run the party. I told him that

there were things I would have to learn, but I thought I could do the job.” Robertson evidently did not share this opinion. Norden says that: “Jim called me while we were on vacation. He said, I don’t want you to be my leader.” Commenting on Spencer’s criticisms of the *Workers Vanguard* article, Norden reportedly called them a “power play,” and remarked: “Alison is the anointed successor to Jim; she is choosing the fights to build her authority.” Stamberg took the same view: “Alison was anointed by Jim, so Alison can’t lose.”

No sooner was this report circulated internally, than both Norden and Stamberg, who admitted it was substantially true, proffered profuse written apologies. That Norden had confirmed his ambition to succeed Robertson was bad enough. But worse by far was what he had said about how the Spartacist League operates: not according to its professed democratic-centralist norms, but as a one-man dictatorship, in which important decisions are made, and leaders appointed, from the top down. All but the newest or most naive SL members know that this is how things work. To say it, however, is to violate the ultimate internal taboo. Could this mean, one of Robertson’s toadies would no doubt ask, that Norden and Stamberg agreed with the International Bolshevik Tendency on the nature of the SL’s internal regime? Stamberg no doubt saw this question coming a mile away, and anticipated it in her recantation:

“In the framework of the current discussion, I would like to say something about my grotesque remark that Alison was ‘anointed by Jim.’ It was a remark made in bitter anger, an anger probably accumulated in many fights over the years. In leading and trying to forge an effective PB [Political Bureau], Alison certainly has the added authority of Jim’s support—that authority is quite considerable in our party, as well it should be. She has earned that position, and thus has been *elected* and serves with, and because of, the support of the comrades, including my own....”

—*Ibid.*, emphasis in original

Norden was also duly contrite:

“On my terrible statement that Alison was ‘anointed,’ this could be read as an accusation that the party is bureaucratic, something I have never thought. If it were, I obviously wouldn’t be here today.”

Three years later, he was no longer there.

There is a French saying, “*qui s’excuse s’accuse*,”—those who excuse themselves accuse themselves. Norden and Stamberg had already said too much. Robertson did not react immediately; his style is to bide his time and wait for the opportune moment to strike. But their ill-considered remarks were never forgotten. They were no doubt on the mind of one of Robertson’s nastiest attack dogs, Al Nelson, when he went after Norden for “Pabloist” deviations. Nelson’s accusations were without political substance. He accused Norden of over-estimating the possibilities of regroupment with a wing of the PDS (the former East German Stalinists, reconstituted as social democrats), and, in a mind-boggling exhibition of cynicism, cited as evidence of revisionism Norden’s denial that the ICL’s German affiliate constituted a revolutionary leadership during the final crisis of the DDR in 1989. The German group consisted of *eight* members at the time.

For reasons that we can only guess at, Norden did not back down. Nelson comments:

“In the past when one of these episodes provoked a fight in the party he would grudgingly yield to the party’s

judgment and go on to something else. But not this time. For six months he has categorically defied the party’s judgment....”

—*Shamefaced Defectors*

Thus began the final anti-Norden campaign in the Spartacist League.

Who Did What in Brazil?

In explaining their purge, the IG stresses the SL’s rupture with the LQB/LM. And in the 18 months since the purge, the exchanges between the SL and the IG have been dominated by accusation and counter-accusation regarding events in Brazil. The IG has addressed every accusation raised by the SL, and clearly comes out on top; their account is better documented and internally consistent. The SL constantly shifts its line of attack, and it is unable to respond directly to the IG’s most important arguments. Despite a welter of demagogic charges against the LQB/LM—charges of class collaboration, opportunism and treachery—the SL is unable to present a convincing account of the break.

The IG’s version of what happened in Brazil goes roughly as follows. The LQB/LM had attained considerable influence in a municipal workers’ union (the SFPMVR) in the city of Volta Redonda, where one of their supporters, Geraldo Ribeiro, was president of the union. At the urging of the ICL leadership, Ribeiro began, starting from about March 1996, a campaign in the union to expel members of the municipal police. This led to a polarization within the union (including the development of a pro-cop faction), harassment from agencies of the state (including a police raid on a union meeting), and legal actions against the union and Ribeiro as its president (including one which suspended and sought to oust him from office). It was as this struggle was reaching its climax that the ICL severed fraternal relations with the LBQ/LM.

Subsequently, when the case ousting him from the union presidency collapsed, and the court offered to restore him to office, Ribeiro refused, on grounds of principled opposition to state interference in the workers’ movement.

The SL has not succeeded in discrediting this story. They sent two fact-finding missions to Volta Redonda, as a result of which they claim to have discovered: 1) that the LQB/LM never really intended to expel the police, and 2) that Ribeiro not only sought the withdrawal of the court order, but had actively sued the union and turned over its minutes and financial records to the courts.

The Internationalist Group has answered every one of these charges. They have produced union leaflets and articles from the local bourgeois press proving that their intention to throw the police out was well known to friend and foe alike for months before the ICL’s termination of fraternal relations. They quote court papers and legal statements documenting difficulties in controlling the lawyers conducting Ribeiro’s defense, and the withdrawal from proceedings initiated improperly in his name. They have produced a statement from one of his lawyers saying that Ribeiro had declined advice to press his advantage in the courts, causing the lawyer to withdraw from the case. Moreover, the IG quote court documents to the effect it was not Ribeiro, but the union accountant, who had the minutes and financial records, and was ordered to hand them over to the court as a result of the suit by the pro-police faction.

We are in no position to pronounce judgment on every detail of this controversy. But important elements of vari-

ous of the ICL's versions fly in the face of considerable documentary evidence—evidence which is manifestly in the possession of the ICL. On the other hand, the arguments and evidence presented by the IG seem credible.

ICL's Dive in Volta Redonda: Not the First Time

While the IG is evidently right against the Spartacist League on the substance of the dispute in Brazil, it is quite mistaken to claim that the breaking of fraternal relations with the LQB/LM was a turning point in the history of the SL/ICL. According to the IG, the reason for the break was political cowardice. By defying the infamously brutal Brazilian police, the LQB/LM exposed itself to real physical hazards: one meeting of the Volta Redonda union was raided by the military police; one leader was arrested for his local leadership role in a general strike; and Ribeiro was sued by the municipality for defamation for defending a black woman who had been fired by the city administration. Faced with these circumstances, according to the IG, the ICL/SL leadership in New York and California decided the situation in Volta Redonda was far too risky. They therefore advised the LQB/LM to move to Rio de Janeiro, and concentrate on propaganda and individual recruitment, rather than direct intervention in the unions. When the LQB proved reluctant to take this advice, the Spartacist League broke relations. With this break, the passivity that had been gaining ground in the SL since the downfall of the USSR (a "drift toward abstentionism") led to desertion from the class struggle. Like the violation of democratic-centralist norms in the purge of the "Norden group," this was, in the IG's version, the first time in the history of the SL that such a departure from its revolutionary principles had ever taken place.

But Brazil is hardly the first place where the SL has demonstrated political cowardice or subordinated the imperatives of the class struggle to its own narrow, organizational interests. For example, in the early 1980s, the SL liquidated what remained of its carefully built union fractions. Various rationales were advanced, but the real, unstated reason was that Robertson feared that these fractions, several of which had developed real roots, might one day be a base for a factional opposition. [See the June 1983 pamphlet by the External Tendency of the iSt (ET) entitled "Stop the Liquidation of the Trade Union Work!"]

In July 1984, the SL leadership, obviously fearful of repression aimed at itself in conjunction with the Democratic Party convention in San Francisco, volunteered to send a union defense squad to protect the Democrats from an imaginary "threat" of attack by Reaganites and fascists (see: *WV*, 6 July 1984). This bizarre episode, in which the SL suggested that Hitler's burning of the Reichstag was "a fitting historical model" for the Reaganites, provoked the ridicule of the rest of the left (see: "The Politics of Chicken," *Bulletin of the ET*, No. 4). Such an overture to one of the twin parties of U.S. imperialism was only possible because decision making in the SL is the prerogative of one unchallengeable leader.

If the SL's posturing at the Democratic convention had little impact outside its own ranks, this was unfortunately not the case when later that year the SL deliberately sabotaged an 11-day boycott of apartheid cargo by longshoremen in San Francisco. The SL's response to the first and only anti-apartheid labor action in U.S. history was to set up a "picket line" on the pier where a ship carrying South African cargo was docked. They abused as "scabs" the (mostly

black) longshoremen who went aboard to carry out a union decision to unload the vessel selectively, leaving the South African cargo on board. The SL attempted to sabotage this boycott solely because it had been initiated by the External Tendency, forerunner of the IBT. For the SL, the cherished principles of the class struggle have long taken second place when the object is to discredit an opponent.

Pre-emptive Strike Against LQB/LM

The Internationalist Group is unable to explain satisfactorily the SL's motives for the break with the LQB/LM. To be sure, an element of cowardice was involved; one can hardly expect exemplary courage from an outfit that responded to the 1983 demolition of the U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon with a call to save the survivors! But the IG seems to have overlooked the most obvious motive, even though it is evident in the documents they themselves have published. In their angry reply to ICL's severing of fraternal relations, the LQB wrote:

"Comrades Adam, Cirrus and Arturo [of the ICL] asked us several times what we thought of the struggle with Norden, Abrao [Negrete] and other comrades. We answered that before judging, we wanted to see all the documents, since critical analysis is a part of daily life for all Marxists. You refused, arguing that these documents were internal to the organization, and you only sent copies of decisions after the accomplished fact. But then why ask our opinion about things we couldn't investigate?"

—*From A Drift...*

It is abundantly clear from this that the ICL representatives were trying to line up the LQB/LM in the fight against Norden, which was already in full swing. When the LQB leaders didn't come up with the right answer, the ICL leadership evidently feared that the LQB/LM, with their previous close relationship with Norden and Negrete, could provide them with a base of support. This led to the ICL's preemptive break with the LQB/LM. Robertson was adhering to an old pattern. In 1978, in a pre-emptive strike against those he perceived as potential oppositionists, the SL got rid of a whole layer of its youth leadership in the "clone purge." The following year, with the same motivation, Robertson framed and expelled two of the international Spartacist tendency's most important international cadres, in the infamous Logan trial. And it was for this same reason—not due to different assessments of the likelihood of repression—that the SL regime ended its relationship with what appears to be a very courageous and dedicated collective of Brazilian militants.

Robertson the Reluctant?

Deliberately or naively, Norden and Co. are just as blind concerning the role of Robertson in their own purge. Comparing Robertson to the historic leader of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), James P. Cannon, Norden and Stenberg write:

"Cannon himself, while not actively leading the fight against the Revolutionary Tendency in the SWP [progenitor of the SL], did condone it, and Robertson has unfortunately played a similar role in the fight against us.

"...with Nelson and Parks [Spencer] firmly determined to smash Norden, comrade Robertson eventually joined the onslaught, evidently seeing this as necessary for the consolidation of the new leadership."

—*From A Drift...*

For those familiar with the individuals involved, the

absurdity of this comparison is nothing short of breathtaking. The entire political training of Nelson and Spencer consists in doing Robertson's bidding. Do Norden and Stamberg now believe (or wish others to believe) that Nelson and Spencer, in a couple of brief years, started acting as independent agents capable of bending their former master to their purposes? Have Norden and Stamberg forgotten how Robertson, while still resident in New York, and still directly leading the organization, personally orchestrated the nightmarish sessions of the New York local devoted to chastising and humiliating them? What of Robertson's statement over the phone to Norden that he didn't want him as his leader? Furthermore, the epithet in the title of the SL's bulletin on their purge, "Shamefaced Defectors From Trotskyism," was inspired by a letter from Robertson, published in the same bulletin, which branded Norden as "a shamefaced defector with associated organizational pathology." And finally, a reply to an SL sympathizer in *Workers Vanguard* (27 September 1996), "drawn heavily" from another Robertson letter, argues that Norden was politically unfit because, among other things, he had disagreed with the SL leadership in 1973 over whether the treaty the North Vietnamese concluded with the U.S. was a sellout. What further evidence of Robertson's role do Norden and Co. require? Robertson coming at them with a meat cleaver?

In Flight From the Truth

Only one of the SL's accusations against the IG contains a grain of truth; the suggestion that, for such a tiny organization, its press constitutes something of a Potemkin Village. Normally, one would expect a group of cadres who had broken from an organization to which they were devoted, to make a more serious attempt to trace its degeneration. The IG seeks to avoid such questions, and instead treats the SL prior to its own purge as an organization with an unblemished record. This recalls the Maoists who used to argue that the Soviet Union was transformed from a workers' paradise to a state-capitalist hell when Joseph Stalin's heart stopped beating.

With its lengthy articles on the class struggle around the world, *The Internationalist* seems aimed at a readership beyond the reach of the IG. Some of this can be attributed to the fact that Norden, who ran *WV* for 23 years, no doubt feels like a fish out of water without a publication to edit. It is as if, following his expulsion from the *WV* editorial

offices, Norden has simply continued to run on automatic pilot. Yet force of habit can also provide a refuge from truths that are hard to face. And the truth the IG has thus far steadfastly refused to confront is that the organization that expelled them in 1996 had long since degenerated.

The reasons for the IG's psychological resistance to this reality are not difficult to fathom. The SL continues to disguise its seamy reality with the forms and phrases of Marxism. The founders of the IG had, in the years prior to their expulsion, become accustomed to the lack of internal democracy in the ICL. Like many other old-time SL cadres who remain in the ICL, the founders of the IG were not prepared to abandon the organization into which they poured so much effort, in which they had acquired a certain status, and around which their lives had revolved for so many years. And so they refuse to acknowledge the truth, even in the face of overwhelming evidence.

Thus, the IG offers an account of its origins that will not stand critical examination. But this creates a certain predicament. The more they analyze the events surrounding their departure from the Spartacist League, the stronger become the echoes of our critique. And the louder these echoes become, the more shrilly the IG tries to drown them out by repeating SL-confected slanders against the IBT. The IG has not, as the SL charges, refrained from polemicizing against opponents. But in reading *The Internationalist*, it is difficult to avoid the impression that the IGers would like to escape from their predicament by putting their political past behind them and going on to better things.

The Internationalist contains analysis—some good—about situations in Europe, Latin America and elsewhere. The IG's political acumen could, however, be rated more highly if they were less oblivious to their own experience. New positions cannot be won without settling old accounts. As long as the IG comrades remain in politics—indeed, as long as they remain thinking individuals—the unanswered questions concerning their political past will not go away. The comrades of the Internationalist Group possess among them many years of political experience, substantial knowledge of Marxism and deep reserves of energy and will—all of which can still be of great value to the working class. In the name of the revolutionary future, we urge them to pause and examine their past with a more reflective eye. ■