

# The Road out of Jimstown

## New York BT Launched

The establishment of a Bolshevik Tendency (BT) nucleus in New York City, traditionally the political center of the American left, marks another small but important step forward in our attempt to consolidate a viable Trotskyist organization in North America.

The events which led to the launching of the New York BT began unfolding in the spring of 1986 when two cadres in the SL's New York local had the temerity to question an erroneous theoretical pronouncement on the part of Ed K., who was being promoted as a local leader and black spokesperson by SL James Robertson, SL National Chairman and Perfect Master. Comrade Ed claimed, contrary to the most fundamental Trotskyist teaching on the Russian question, that surplus value exists as a significant component of the Soviet economy. The newly-appointed "party leader" did not, as far as we can tell, consciously intend to revise Trotsky on this score. Marxist economics was simply not his strong suit. But these days in the SL, leaders are not to be contradicted, no matter what they say.

The two SL cadres involved (Jim C. and Dave E.) had between them a total of 28 years in the Trotskyist movement. While they refused to abandon their positions they were prepared to pursue the matter in informal discussion or even to let it drop. Ed K. was not. He sensed an opportunity to bolster his authority and purge the ranks of two members who insisted on the right to think for themselves. First in an internal education class and then at a subsequent local meeting, he continued to exacerbate the dispute, proposing to rectify his critics' "mistakes" through further education, the contents of which would be dictated by himself. When the two now-exasperated members—one at the explicit urging of the local—wrote documents expressing their displeasure at being attacked for upholding basic Marxist positions, the scene was set for a typical purge, Spartacist-style.

### Purge In New York SL

No sooner had the documents appeared than the leadership started putting out the word that their "uncomradely tone" could not possibly be explained by the purely theoretical issues involved, and must therefore be the result of other, more sinister motives on the part of the authors. The membership—with the help of a couple of deliberately vague and insinuating documents from Ed K.—was thus given the signal to trot out the familiar litany of accusations against those slated for an SL heretic-burning: intellectual elitism, Menshevism, anti-Sovietism and, since these individuals had the misfortune of crossing polemical swords with a black comrade, perhaps something even worse.

At a meeting called in September to "resolve" this dispute, SL members, duly primed for the occasion, rose one after another in a hysterical competition to heap

opprobrium upon the two miscreants. But not to be outdone, it was *el supremo* Robertson (who admitted offhandedly that he had not even bothered to read the pertinent documents) who rose to deliver the *coup-de-grace*. Robertson said that, although he couldn't prove it, he suspected racism on the part of the two dissenters. They just couldn't admit to themselves, he went on, that a black man could be so much better than they are. The meeting concluded with the passage of the obligatory motions accusing the apostate pair of harboring deviations on the black, party and Russian questions. Both these members handed in angry resignations the following week. A third SL cadre—a fifteen year member who is a recognized expert on American and black history—resigned a few weeks later in sympathy. Jim C.'s resignation read, in part:

"The official reason given for my resignation will no doubt be that I left the party out of white, intellectual elitist antipathy towards the current perspective of black recruitment. This is a lie—only the most infamous of a torrent of lies unleashed at the local meeting of 16 September in order to cover up one simple fact: the present party regime will not tolerate significant opposition to any of its major pronouncements or decisions. Therefore, when a member opposes a particular decision or questions the conduct of a particular individual in the leadership, he is accused of opposing the entire party program. In the case of Dave E. and myself, the singularly ugly charge of racism was thrown in for good measure by the political chairman. This is tantamount to (and perhaps even worse than) the formula, opposition = disloyalty, used to expel the Revolutionary Tendency [progenitor of the SL] from the Socialist Workers Party twenty-three years ago, and makes a mockery of the party history being so proudly recounted in recent issues of *Spartacist*."

This whole episode shows what happens to SL members who attempt to defend their views, orally or in writing, against Robertson's favorites. In the Spartacist school, whoever disagrees with Robertson's flunkeys attacks Robertson, and whoever attacks Robertson, attacks the Trotskyist program, of which he is the sole legitimate interpreter. The political substance of the disagreement is immaterial.

### BT Launched in New York

In the months that followed their break from the SL, the comrades involved in the blow up, together with several other former SL members, began to reflect on and generalize from their experiences. After studying the BT's published materials, they engaged in a series of discussions with comrades from the BT and arrived at a firm political agreement on all outstanding questions.

The New York BT held its first public meeting on 16 May. The event drew forty people, many of whom were former members or supporters of the SL. Entitled "For the Rebirth of the Fourth International," the forum was

given by comrade Gerald Smith. Smith described the degeneration of the Spartacist League from a revolutionary propaganda group with a tenuous but real connection to the American working class into the cultist political bandit outfit it is today. His remarks were followed by a lively round of discussion.

We offered the SL leadership a twenty-minute rebuttal but they declined. All we got was five largish *Workers Vanguard* salesmen, several wearing steel-toed boots, who stood in front of the meeting and unsuccessfully attempted to persuade people not to attend. We were not surprised by the SL's refusal to take up our offer. For years the Spartacist League has flatly refused to meet us in an open, public debate, while their press continues to churn out a series of "polemics" reminiscent of the anti-Trotskyist tracts produced by the CPUSA in the 1930's.

The 15 May issue of *Workers Vanguard* devoted one and a half pages to an item entitled "Garbage Doesn't Walk By Itself—What Makes BT Run?" The article, occasioned by our New York forum, was evidently intended to seal off what remains of the SL's periphery in that city with a line of cop-baiting filth and slander. This technique, perfected by Joseph Stalin in his struggle against Trotskyism, has long been recognized as the last refuge of every scoundrel in the workers movement.

### In Defense of Polemics

The *WV* article argues that the BT (and its predecessor, the External Tendency of the iSt—ET) is so fixated on politically attacking the SL that it cannot be defined in rational political terms:

"When people quit an organization, they generally don't want to have anything more to do with it; they have other fish to fry. But the ET/BT has always pursued an unnatural obsession with the SL...The BT has spent five years bewailing our 'degeneration.' Are we that important? Not according to the BT: in the pages of its bulletins and its *1917* magazine, the SL is 'over the brink,' on a 'plunge toward political irrelevance,' 'can no longer be considered, in any sense, a revolutionary organization'."

What then, asks *WV*, could possibly account for the BT's continuing attention to the SL? After serving up a rehash of its standard litany of smears, half-truths and outright lies, *WV* finally comes to the point:

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

The SL's "evidence" for this despicable cop-baiting smear is that we refuse to let the SL alone. This is a strange accusation coming from an organization itself frequently cop-baited precisely for this stance. If a polemical attitude toward one's opponents suggests CO-INTELPRO provocation, what of the SL's decades-long fight—waged with frequent press articles, leaflets, interventions and even demonstrations—against its rivals in the Socialist Workers Party and the Healyite Workers League and its British mentors? In devoting two recent issues of its theoretical journal, *Spartacist*, to these two organizations, is the SL pursuing an "unnatural obsession?"

A minor irony in all this is that having effectively withdrawn from the unions and any prospect of serious influence in the working class or the left, the Robertsonites actually occupy less and less of our time and activity. But because the SL rarely appears at political events which it does not control, it has little sense of this.

*WV*'s latest smear job speaks volumes about the SL's contempt for its own history. When it was a revolutionary organization the Spartacist League engaged in political battle with Barnes, Moreno, Healy and assorted other "Trotskyists" because these political charlatans, by pretending to the Trotskyist banner, misled and confused those subjectively revolutionary youth who took their claims at face value.

The Spartacist League even now does not openly recruit people on the basis of their desire to enhance the power, prestige and material comfort of its infallible founder-leader. If it did, we would cease to bother with it. It is only because the SL disguises its cultish reality with the trappings of its revolutionary past, in order to recruit healthy young militants searching for a revolutionary organization, that telling the sordid truth about life in "Jimstown" remains an elementary duty for Trotskyists. ■