

Max Shachtman and his left

Barry Finger reviews "Max Shachtman and his left: a socialist's odyssey through the 'American Century'", Peter Drucker, Humanities Press, 1994.

IN THE LATE 1960s, the New York branch of the International Socialists, the direct political descendant and heir apparent to the Third Camp traditions of the Workers' Party (1940-49) and Independent Socialist League (1949-58), whose main leader had been Max Shachtman, issued an indignant denial to the "crude distortions and outright misrepresentations" of the Cannonite Young Socialist Alliance. Foremost among the misconceptions which the IS was at pains to dispel was the characterisation of the IS as "Shachtmanite":

"A class line is drawn," they charged, "between us and the Shachtmanites. A few concrete examples: unlike the Shachtmanites, our tendency (a) opposed the Bay of Pigs invasion (or Cuba, by the US-backed rightwingers, 1961); (b) calls for immediate withdrawal from Vietnam and has done so for at least five years; (c) supported the black community in the New York City teachers' strike; (d) supports rank-and-file struggles in the trade unions; (e) defends the new movements against the repression. If our paper claimed that Jim Cannon was a Stalinist because he was once in the same Comintern as Stalin, you would be torn between outrage and amusement. To link our tendency politically to the Shachtmanites is to make the same kind of amalgam, and we are not amused."

Ironically, while repudiating Shachtman, without whose previous 30 year legacy there would quite simply have been no IS, the organisation's common revolutionary ancestry with the Cannonites — an ancestry long stripped of any operative significance or meaningful contemporary political reference — was emphatically, even enthusiastically, reaffirmed.

Yet, in a very real sense this, paradox speaks volumes to the tragic renegacy of Shachtman in the final phase of his life, from the late 1950s — when he successfully agitated to dissolve his organisation into the long moribund Socialist Party — to his death in 1972. Of the inner political life of this later Shachtman, we know — paradoxically — virtually nothing. His thought processes were no longer committed to paper; his opinions were confined only to an inner-circle. Writer's block was the psychological price the later Shachtman paid for the repudiation of a lifetime of revolutionary commitment. Yet it is precisely this commitment, a contribu-

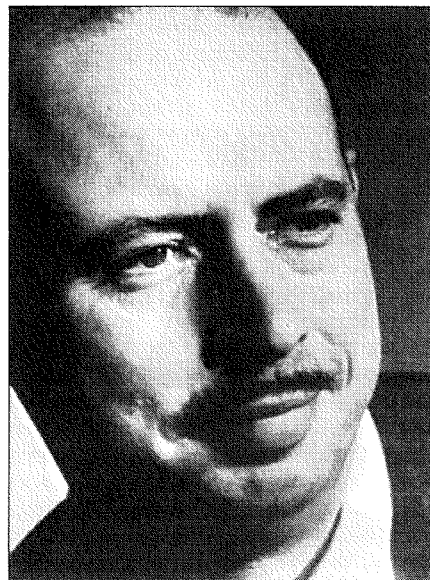
tion virtually without parallel within his generation, that merits this long overdue evaluation of this singular personality and the extraordinary movement which he nourished.

It is the political significance of this other Shachtman which Peter Drucker recognises and to whom he pays a critical, yet well-deserved tribute.

Shachtman entered the socialist movement in 1921 at the age of 17, his formative experiences decisively shaped by the Russian Revolution, whose ramified course and fate virtually engulfed all political events for the ensuing half-century and more. In the mid-20s he became an editor of the *Young Worker*, a frequent contributor to the *Daily Worker* and the *Liberator*, was an alternate to the Central Committee of the CP and one of its delegates to the 1925 and '27 Conferences of the Third International. Seven years after entering the ranks of the movement, Shachtman was expelled — branded a Trotskyist for having circulated Trotsky's suppressed, *The Third International After Lenin*, smuggled out of Russia by Cannon. Within the next 15 years, Shachtman was to play a central role in affiliating over twenty-five national sections to the Fourth International and was to forge its theoretical journal, *The New Internationalist*, into a powerful weapon of political analysis and agitation. He tirelessly translated, edited and inscribed forewords to dozens of Trotsky's works and was ultimately to remain literary executor of the Old Man's estate, despite having broken from the Cannonites.

What earned Shachtman his place in the history of revolutionary ideas? To defend the 1917 socialist experiment in revolutionary democracy, (without either deifying its leaders or justifying its every deed) and to salvage its heritage and inspiration from the corruption of Stalinism, Shachtman and his comrades were driven to continuously extend their analysis beyond the rapidly ossifying confines of "orthodox" Trotskyism. Stalinism, they argued, was not merely a corrupt outgrowth of an otherwise intact workers' state, but a constitutive component of a new counter-revolutionary social system built over the gravesite of the Russian revolution. This "bureaucratic collectivism" was the result of the automation of state power, the transformation of the state bureaucracy into an independent and uncontrolled class formation. They, like the classical ruling classes of Oriental Despotism, exercised control over the means of production not by right of private property, but collectively through their amassing of an unchallengeable state monopoly over the levers of economic, political and social power.

The Workers' Party was guided by



Max Shachtman

Lenin's dictum that "whoever wants to approach socialism by any means other than political democracy will inevitably arrive at absurd and reactionary conclusions." The inseparability of socialism and democracy was the distinctive hallmark of independent socialism. The WP-ISL viewed the world of their day as a three cornered struggle between two ruling classes — capitalist and bureaucratic collectivist — which continuously threatened humanity with extinction, and a third camp, consisting of the working class and the oppressed masses who are its natural allies. The power of this latent revolutionary-democratic movement from below lies as yet dormant until, roused by the defence of its own vital interests, it is driven into irreconcilable opposition to the two ruling classes.

Whatever their self-conception, either as a mass party in formation or as a ginger-group at the left wing of the labour, civil rights and peace movements, the Shachtmanites not only refused to extend an "unconditional defence of the Soviet Union", but sharpened and honed their analysis in revolutionary opposition to all sides during World War II; they were the only socialist grouping in America to have done so. They mercilessly exposed the war against fascism as a vehicle that would advance totalitarianism on a world scale, leaving the world to be policed by the new victors on an imperialist basis while enfeebling and corrupting the workers' organisations in the bourgeois democracies through their intensified self-negation as tools useful to any social purpose beyond the pursuit of victory.

While the SWPers were hunkering down to "preserve the cadre" by keeping quiet in the unions and elsewhere, the WP used

its opposition to both war camps to break into heavy industry, now numbering in its ranks virtually 80% of the WP's membership. Unencumbered by loyalties, residual or otherwise, to any ruling class, the WP fought to revoke the wartime no-strike pledge, to remove labour from the War Labor Board, to push for equal pay and equal work against Jim Crow racism, both in industry and in the military, and for the immediate establishment of a US Labour Party. By 1943, the weekly paper of the Shachtmanites, *Labor Action*, carried its message with press runs of up to 40,000. Its consistent pursuit of working-class interests, including black and white unity, brought the WP into consistent loggerheads with the Stalinists and their supporters. The CP was distinguished among the labour movement factions by the virulent consistency of their support for the war. They supported the forcible confinement of Japanese-Americans, sabotaged the Double V campaign to end segregation and deployed police-like tenacity in persecuting worker-militants who threatened wartime production. These experiences stimulated a more profound understanding of Stalinism, and culminated in a unique form of anti-Stalinism theoretically consistent with the theory of bureaucratic collectivism.

The WP's anti-Stalinism represented a marked departure from Trotskyism, which held social-democratic reformism and Stalinism to be essentially symmetrical phenomena: the social-democrats were agents of their respective ruling classes and the Stalinists agents first of Russia and later of the various "workers' state 'oligarchies'." To Shachtman and his movement "none of the old designations of 'right', 'left', 'centrist' — applic[ed] to Stalinism." This conclusion was an outgrowth of its developing appraisal of Stalinism as a distinct anti-working class society. In its reformism and its pro-Western defensiveness, social democracy reflects the conservative policies of the labour leadership, which for all its class collaborationism, is nevertheless still organically tied to the working class. Trade union bureaucracies and the labour party leaderships which rest on them can only secure and advance their bureaucratic privileges under those conditions in which bourgeois democracy is itself preserved, for these are the only circumstances conducive to the maintenance of an independent labour movement. That the social-democrats struggle to maintain an independent labour movement in an ineffectual and inconsistent manner, attempting to preserve democracy by stifling both totalitarian forces and revolution, was well understood and did not in the least detract from the general proposition.

The Stalinist parties, on the other hand, are the ideological agents, not of a conservative section of a working class movement, but of a social force whose interests are diametrically opposed to an independent workers' movement and whose triumph would be unattainable without the complete annihilation of the labour movement in all its forms. "Stalinism

is a reactionary, totalitarian, anti-bourgeois and anti-proletarian current in the labour movement but not of the labour movement..." These remain the standards against which any historical evaluation of the various national CPs must be measured.

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From this perspective, the WP oriented its day to day trade union work towards combining with progressive anti-Stalinists as well as conservative elements against the CP.

This by no means led it to endorse the government's anti-Communist witch hunts or loyalty oaths within the union movement. On the contrary, Shachtman held McCarthyism to be not only a threat to democracy but a potential harbinger of a more sweeping assault against the left. A labour movement able to oust Stalinism from its own ranks would be one fortified in struggle by a heightened democratic and class consciousness; imported from above

by the capitalist state and imposed out of fear for suppression of trade union rights, such anti-Communism would constitute a working-class debacle. The WP, to its abiding credit, exposed the vacillations of weak-kneed ex-radicals and liberals — the spiritual ancestors of today's neo-conservatives — in defence of the democratic rights of the Stalinists, despite having been on the receiving end of not a few CP frame-ups and violence in the CIO and elsewhere. Thus the Shachtmanites protested the conviction of the Stalinist Harry Bridges, protested the McCarran Act of 1950 under which Communists were sentenced, and defended university teachers being harassed and fired as subversives.

The expected working-class radicalisation failed to materialise at the termination of World War II. Indeed, the party failed to keep the workers recruited during the war, losing many in the course of just a few months after they succumbed to the grueling routines of party life. An attempted reunification with the SWP failed, having been scuttled by Cannon's concept of a monolithic party. In 1948 the WP cut its last links with the Fourth International over the Second World Congress's criminally inept position that the countries of Eastern Europe overtaken by Stalinism remained capitalist states; but that if the CPs proved capable of overturning capitalism, then Stalinism would have to be seen as revolutionary. This Shachtman argued would logically amount to saying that the International was unnecessary.

By 1949 the WP was half the size it had been coming out of the war. The revolutionary party perspective was abandoned and the WP, now renamed the Independent Socialist League identified itself as a more limited propaganda group, with its main task that of bringing the ideas of

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socialism to the working class and the oppressed. The ISL asserted that the main task of the labour movement in the US is political self-organisation — the development of a labour party — and that the development of a political programme is indispensable not only once such a party is formed, but also for the purpose of breathing life into its formative process. The programme it put forward was not for the socialist reorganisation of society, but one consistent with the struggle to preserve and extend democracy and to protect the working class and its allies from the reactionary war economy, which the ISL claimed capitalism to be in the grip of, and from the looming third world war itself. The fight to protect democratic rights would increasingly become the means of fighting for socialism. The ISL declared its complete non-confidence in any capitalist government, no matter how liberal, to consistently champion the elementary democratic needs of the people or break with the imperialist traditions and reactionary policies of the past, needed to combat Stalinism in a progressive fashion.

It is in this period, the late 1940s and 1950s, that Drucker is at his weakest. Left unexamined is the notable relationship between the Shachtmanites and leading intellectuals who passed through the ISL or its youth movements. His treatment of the turn of the Shachtmanites towards the Communist Party in the trade unions appears to dispute the basic WP-ISL formulation of the alien character of Stalinism to the labour movement without offering an alternative evaluation. It is evident in Drucker's misguided characterisation of the 1948 Wallace campaign and his pained failure to accept that the Wallace movement had become a tool of the Stalinists. Inklings are detected in the late 1940s and early 1950s of Shachtman's later right-wing trajectory, but they are based on misinterpretation or an impressionistic forcing of the facts. Some of Drucker's comments on the Shachtmanite orientation during the Cold War understate the complicity of Stalinism in poisoning the atmosphere of world politics. These errors are unavoidable in writing partisan political history, when the political sources of the author's commitment remain unelaborated or sketchy and piecemeal at best as do Drucker's.

Yet it is in the final chapters of Shachtman's life, a period of — there is no way of putting it charitably — socialist renege, for which Drucker draws on a remarkably poignant reserve of sympathy. The reasons behind Shachtman's moral collapse cannot be chalked up to mere Stalinophobia, an all-consuming hatred for Stalinism which subordinates all other political considerations and values to its defeat. The explanation is rather found in conjunction with anti-Stalinism, the belief that the conscious cadres of socialism had been destroyed by fascism and Stalinism, and compounded by the continuously demoralising framework of operating in the absence of a politically organised working class, that — in short — there no longer existed the objective political forces from

which a socialist movement could arise and build a viable alternative. The ISL was rejected as a holding action in favour of bureaucratic substitutes which could create a simulacrum of momentum. "He convinced himself that the AFL-CIO was almost a mass socialist movement, that the Democratic Party was almost a labour party, that Johnson's Great Society had almost made African Americans equal, that the United States had almost saved Vietnam for democracy."

The enduring contributions and theoretical breakthroughs of the WP-ISL have enormous resonance for socialists today. Their spirited celebration of the Bolshevik revolution, not only against its detractors, but also against its authoritarian would-be defenders such as Isaac Deutscher, are electrifying in their originality, instructive in their depth and forever relevant as a subterranean entrance to one of the most movingly liberating and tragic events of the century. The movement was without compare in charting the degeneration of the Revolution, chronicling the Moscow trials and charting the evolution of bureaucratic collectivism. From their application and development of Lenin's anti-war analyses to the Second World War and then the Korean war, to their expositions on the national question; from their elaborations of radical trade union tactics, to their writings on Palestine and Zionism; from the tactics of the Popular Front, to their examination of socialist politics during the Cold War; from their fight against McCarthyism in defence of civil liberties, to their manifold investigations into the history of revolutionary parties and movements — the WP-ISL brought an unparalleled range of revolutionary experience and reflection to bear as a guide to socialist action. Drucker adds immensely to our appreciation of this remarkable movement through his panoramic review centred on the career of Max Shachtman. For this he merits the gratitude of every thinking socialist. He fills a void in the history not only of American socialism, but in the breadth and sweep of revolutionary Marxism itself. That Shachtman and his movement conquered a place in the history of revolutionary politics is incontestable, but not as, say, George Novack would have it, because he "ably expounded the criticisms of Stalinism and Social Democracy developed by the Russian Left Opposition" and thus helped lay the foundations of the Trotskyist Fourth International. It is in no small measure that Drucker too deserves our respect for this refreshing recognition, all the more remarkable for his adherence to the Cannonite tradition which militates so forcefully against such an appreciation.

For all that, the fundamental gap to this work is its failure to recognise the formidable contributions of those comrades who continued standing fast in full commitment to the formative revolutionary politics of the third camp. It is to the efforts above all of Julius and Phyllis Jacobson, of Hal Draper, of *New Politics* magazine, which allows for an unbroken, generational memory extending to the New Left and beyond. ■

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