

FEBRUARY-MARCH, 1964

SPARTACIST

THE LEFT WING VIEWS THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION

The assassination of President Kennedy was an acid test of the class position of each left movement in the United States. Among the radical groups in America, a qualitative division may be perceived between those tendencies which turned resolutely to the working class for an independent alternative to bourgeois statesmanship, and those formations which joined their cries to the liberal threnody for the late president.

PROGRESSIVE LABOR

Nov. 27, 1963—"The assassination of President Kennedy, by a still unknown assailant, not only reflects the existence of serious political contradictions for the U.S. ruling class, but raises these contradictions to new heights. . . .

"While it is essential that revolutionaries evaluate all of the political aspects of the assassination, it is also necessary for revolutionaries to reject assassination as a conceivable form of political struggle. The killing of one man cannot alter the course of history. Only efforts by millions to change the particular political and economic system can be decisive. . . . Finally, assassination only tends to confuse the real issues that face the workers. It encourages the ruling class to step up the oppression of the people.

"Assassination and individual violence, however, is part and parcel of the Capitalist system. . . .

" . . . On several occasions our government has engineered or supported actual organized assassinations with great relish. The assassination of Patrice Lumumba was warmly welcomed by the Kennedy Administration. Furthermore, assassination has also been a way of eliminating friends who have outlived their usefulness to the Administration. Only weeks before the Kennedy assassination, the Administration (and many who now cry hypocritical tears for Kennedy) were laughing up their sleeves over the U.S.-inspired assassination of Diem and his brother in South Viet-Nam. . . .

"In the face of this continued ruthlessness and terror, the people and especially those who consider themselves fighters for socialism, should not be caught up in the whirl-wind of ruling class contradictions. The people should utilize every moment for pressing their demands. They should not wait for the Johnson Administration to resume the

offensive—as it will—against the people's fight for a better life. Johnson's record is part and parcel of the oppression of the ruling class—with a dash of Southern seasoning added for good measure.

"The People are still faced with racism, unemployment, poor housing and schooling, high rents and high-priced (or no) medical services. The People, if they are really to unite, should unite around programs dealing with their problems."

WORKERS WORLD

Nov. 25, 1963—"The United States of America came close to a fascist coup d'état, and the establishment of a Right Wing, reactionary, totalitarian dictatorship.

"This is really the main and fundamental fact to emerge from the assassination of President Kennedy.

"That the coup d'état did not actually come off can only be explained by the fact that the forces of political reaction, virulent racism and 'preventive war' militarism, had failed to coalesce at the critical moment and emerge with 'a man on horseback.'

"The trend to totalitarian dictatorship can only be reversed by the intervention of an ever larger mass of the millionfold working class movement, and of unity between black and white workers against the common oppressor."

(The Workers World deserves credit for reprinting excerpts from Fidel Castro's excellent statement on the assassination.)

RED FLAG

(British organ of the Posadas group, the Latin-American-based Trotskyist tendency.)

Jan., 1964—"The assassination of Kennedy is the result of a struggle between bandits. One faction has liquidated a member of the opposite faction.

"Within the heart of Yankee imperialism there are two tendencies. One tendency centers on what is called the Pentagon and is wrongly called 'right wing' (there is no left or right for capitalism but simply different positions in relation to the same policy) and the 'Kennedy' tendency. . . .

"Imperialism, the Kennedy tendency, tries to profit from the conservative interests of the Soviet bureaucracy to

prolong its own existence to the maximum.

"The so-called Pentagon section is aware of this situation and feels that the very time delay means a direct loss for its economic, social and ideological interests. That is the reason for the offensive that it has just carried out.

"The Pentagon killed Kennedy within the framework of a policy designed to launch the war by surprise at that

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not even provided "disloyal" quotes, illegally obtained. Where is the evidence of their "disloyalty"? Association? Bourgeois law is at least formally more democratic.

5. Even with selected quotes of selected documents, the loyalty, not "disloyalty" of the minority tendency would be indicated. Surely these comrades know that the demand to see their internal faction discussion material is a violation of their democratic rights. Yet they show to a Commission member documents that member has no right to see. Will the repeated insistence of the minority comrades of intention to abide by the discipline of the party avail it nothing? If the majority is so anxious for a split, why not have the patience to wait for "subversive" thoughts to be translated into deeds?

6. If the minority surreptitiously recruits youth to the Party on the basis of its factional line, what is there to fear? Are we not confident enough of our point of view, and with full control of the public expression of it, to be certain that we can win the best to the majority? Since when did revolutionary Trotskyists have to resort to organization means to protect its liberating ideas? Are we afraid they will recruit so many that we shall no longer be the majority? That is unfortunately not very realistic; but if it were, we can hope that we have set a good example of how a majority should rule.

7. I propose that we apologize to the minority for the unwarranted investigation and express our desire to collaborate in comradely fashion in the future for the building of the Socialist Workers Party.

moment most convenient to itself."

From the publications of the three groups above, it can be seen that a basic class position was maintained during their discussions of the Kennedy assassination. A class line must not only continue to orient the working class against their class enemy, the bourgeoisie, but must provide a correct analysis for the workers in a period of confusion and consternation. The three groups above never lost sight of their ruling class enemy—nor did they hesitate to point this out to their readers.

There were exaggerations and mistakes, such as the Workers World's confusion between fascism and a coup d'etat. Or the Progressive Labor group's referral to "our" government. And of course the Posadas tendency's conclusion that the Pentagon assassinated Kennedy can only be considered interesting speculation at this point.

These positions stand out in bold contrast to those periodicals and organizations whose "Socialism" and "Marxism" led them in the moment of panic to genuflect to the ruling class. Statements about "Loving (!) This Country (!)" and the like can only serve to confuse and misdirect socialist militants. Compare the following examples.

NEW AMERICA

Dec. 18, 1963—"I am writing this on the day of mourning under a profound sense of shock and loss and shame. We mourn a gallant President, sincerely interested in peace and freedom, who was growing in strength. . . .

"You will be reading this column after Thanksgiving Day, when we will be putting this day of mourning into perspective. For what can we Americans be thankful in this time of tragedy? We can be thankful for some enrichment of memory. We can be thankful for the general outpouring of grief and recognition of the shame at the atmosphere of hate in which the tragedy took place. We can give thanks for the orderly succession and the absence of bitter partisanship in President Johnson's accession to his high office."

—Norman Thomas

"The Socialist Party joins the entire nation in deeply mourning the tragic death of our President. The senseless and dastardly murder which took the life of John F. Kennedy was one of the greatest crimes and tragedies in the history of our country. To Mrs. Kennedy and the entire Kennedy family we extend our most sincere and heartfelt condolences."

Resolution of National Committee of The Socialist Party

THE WORKER

Nov. 26, 1963—"Nation in Mourning for Martyred Leader" (Banner front page headline.)

"We share—along with all other Americans—immeasurable grief at the monstrous and shocking assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

"We extend our deepest sympathy to Mrs. Kennedy, to his son and daughter, and to his entire family. . . .

"Although anguished in sorrow over the loss of the highest officer of our nation, the American people will not be panicked. They will rally around the constitution, defend its basic Democratic traditions and rights, and they will not be diverted from the determination that our nation shall tread the path of ever-expanding democracy, social progress and peace."

IN A MOMENT OF TRUTH . . .

"Let me then make clear as your President that I am determined upon our system's survival and success, regardless of the cost and regardless of the peril."

—Speech of President Kennedy to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, April 21, 1961. (Following the Bay of Pigs fiasco.)

THE MILITANT

Dec. 2, 1963—"If We Really Love This Country We Must Abjure Hatred" (Front page headline quoting Chief Justice Earl Warren as a "Voice of Sanity.")

"The American people have undergone one of the most traumatic experiences in its history. The staggering news that President Kennedy had been assassinated, followed so quickly by the unexplainable, televised murder of his alleged assassin in the Dallas city jail by a crony of the police, left Americans reeling with bewilderment and shock. A wave of apprehension ran through the world with the news of the Kennedy assassination as people of all lands attempted to decipher the cause and portent of the tragic event. . . .

"Before all others, it is the federal government's duty to block the attempt to use the Dallas tragedy for the staging of an even more devastating witch-hunt. Before all others, it is the duty of the federal government to furnish the people with a thorough-going analysis of the atmosphere of hate and violence which fostered that tragedy. Before all others, it is the federal government's duty effectively and fully to enforce the civil liberties of Americans of all political views, no matter how critical of those now dominant, and the civil liberties of all Americans, regardless of color. Only then can the cloud of violence and hate overhanging this country begin to be dispelled."

The Editors

"The Socialist Workers Party condemns the brutal assassination of President Kennedy as an inhuman, anti-

social and criminal act. We extend our deepest sympathy to Mrs. Kennedy and the children in their personal grief.

"The act springs from the atmosphere created by the inflammatory agitation and deeds of the racists and ultra-conservative forces. Political terrorism, like suppression of political freedom, violates the democratic rights of all Americans and can only strengthen the forces of reaction. Political differences within our society must be settled in an orderly manner by majority decision after free and open public debate in which all points of view are heard."

—Farrell Dobbs, National Secretary, Socialist Workers Party

And Now, A Breath of Fresh Air

THE NEWSLETTER

(Organ of the Socialist Labour League, the British Trotskyists.)

Nov. 30, 1963—"This millionaire politician was destroyed by the very contradictions which he thought he could overcome smoothly and peacefully.

"Whether or not we ever learn the truth about the killings in Dallas, Texas, Kennedy's death was without doubt the result of anguishing conflict within the American ruling class.

"On the issues of Negro integration and foreign and defense policy, Kennedy's programme, reflecting the needs of one section of US big business, aroused sharp hostility from powerful economic and political groups.

"The role of the Texas state authorities makes this very clear. If Oswald was framed, and this seems quite probable, the job was organized at a high level in the state machine. . . .

"We do not mourn John F. Kennedy.

"As international socialists we see him as the world leader of the class enemy.

"If he was far-sighted, it was in the interests of the continuation of capitalist exploitation everywhere."

—John Crawford

Dec. 7, 1963—"Marxists and the Kennedy Assassination" (Headline, page two.)

"The assassination of President Kennedy has given rise to a more than usual round of hysteria, tear-jerking and praise-mongering by the literary and political representatives of the middle class.

"Reading some of the articles in the so-called socialist and liberal press about his life, one might be forgiven for thinking that Kennedy stood for the freedom of the Negro people and was, in fact, a socialist in all but name.

"Thus do the hirelings of international capital endeavor to whitewash the most reactionary imperialist power in the world in its hour of crisis.

"Kennedy was, of course, a most able (Continued Next Page)

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representative of his class. Everything that he did had but one objective, to strengthen American imperialism. . . .

"When he spoke about Negro rights, he was merely using high-sounding liberal phraseology so that he could all the better, on behalf of his class, continue to enslave the Negro people.

"Marxists express no sympathy whatsoever over Kennedy's death.

"We do not condone the act of individual terror responsible for his death, not because we are squeamish or humanitarian about how it was done, but because individual terror is no substitute for the construction of the revolutionary party.

Disorganises

"Terrorism is a weapon which in fact disorganises and leaves the working class leaderless. It creates the impression that the removal of prominent capitalist politicians and statesmen can solve the problems of the working class.

"But for every tyrant shot, there is another ready to take his place. Only the overthrow of the capitalist system in the United States and its replacement by working-class power and socialism can solve the problems of the American working-class whites and Negroes.

"Such a task cannot be accomplished by terrorists like Lee Oswald. The answer lies not with them, but through the preparation and building of a revolutionary party which, through mass action, will take the power. . . .

"The taking of power by the revolutionary party is not without terror. The ruling class will not hesitate to terrorise the working class, the Negro and colonial peoples. . . .

"The sympathy of Marxists, while not agreeing with the method of Oswald, must be given to the millions of Oswalds, black and white, who have been driven into pauperism by capitalism. The task of the American Marxist movement is to direct its attention towards these people, and not towards the sending of messages of sympathy to Mrs. Kennedy.

Fatal

"When Lee Oswald fired the fatal shot, he did something more than assassinate a president.

"He also destroyed utterly and completely the lie that the Socialist Workers Party of the United States is a Trotskyist party and that it continues the traditions for which it was founded in the struggle to build the Fourth International.

"The *Militant*, weekly organ of the SWP which, according to its masthead, is published in the interests of the

working people,' carried this news item in its issue of Monday, December 2, headed 'Socialist Leader Denounces Murder of the President':

(Here follows the statement of Farrell Dobbs which is reprinted above.)

"This nauseating report repudiates every principle that Trotsky and the Bolshevik Party fought for. It is a report written by cowardly liberals, whose eyes are turned solely in the direction of the American middle class.

"We extend," says Farrell Dobbs, "our deepest sympathy to Mrs. Kennedy."

"Indeed! And who is Mrs. Kennedy?"

Reactionary

"She is the daughter of a Wall Street millionaire, and was the wife of the leader of the most reactionary imperialist power on earth. Marxists can have no sympathy whatsoever with Mrs. Kennedy and her class.

"Political differences within our society must be settled in an orderly manner," says Dobbs.

"Indeed! Tell that to the Negroes of Birmingham, Alabama, and the miners of Kentucky. Tell that to the millions of colonial people in struggle against imperialism.

"The settlement of class issues will not take place in an orderly manner, but in a violent way, because the ruling class will never give up its power peacefully. To the millions of working people in struggle against imperialism all over the world, Dobbs is just one more American liberal, who talks the language of 'order' so as to mask the brutality of his own imperialist government.

"How Trotsky would have loathed this statement of the leader of the Socialist Workers Party. He would have flayed its author alive in every language he could muster. This is cringing boot-licking of the American petty-bourgeois by a man who claims to be a Marxist!

Attack

"Dobbs sends his condolences to 'Mrs. Kennedy and the children,' but not a word about Mrs. Oswald, a poor Russian woman whose children and herself will be singled out for attack wherever she goes.

"Instead of taking up the cudgels on behalf of the poor in the United States, Dobbs turns his eyes to the representatives of the rich and mighty.

"There was, of course, a distinct possibility that anti-labour witch-hunters would utilise the Kennedy assassination in order to attack the left, but such an attack could not be answered by sending condolences to Mrs. Kennedy. The answer to any witch-hunt is to explain the class issues involved in the assassination, which can only be

done by a thoroughgoing exposure of Kennedy's role.

Betrayed

"Farrell Dobbs does not look to the working class as his only real ally in the fight against the witch-hunt. He looks in the opposite direction, towards the ruling class. On this question, as on all others, Dobbs has betrayed the Marxist movement. . . .

"His political degeneration is a warning to Marxists everywhere. It follows closely on the heels of the so-called 'reunification' with the Pabloites, who supported the brutal assassination by the hired thugs of the FLN of the Algerian trade union leaders in Paris in 1957 and 1958.

"This unification was an alliance of renegades from Trotskyism to turn from the working class to the radical do-gooders whose sole aim is to whitewash imperialism.

"We look forward to any news as to whether or not James P. Cannon, founder of the American Trotskyist movement, was prepared to sign the message of condolence to Mrs. Kennedy."

—Gerry Healy, National Secretary
Socialist Labour League

The acid test of any organization presenting itself as socialist takes place in periods of revolutionary opportunity or crisis. All such organizations were tested in their ability to maintain their principled positions at the time of the Kennedy assassination. To those for whom the concept of Trotskyism is synonymous with firm class positions under the most adverse conditions, the statement of Farrell Dobbs and the entire edition of the *Militant* on the Kennedy assassination came as a profound shock. At a calmer and more reflective moment, even the leaders of the Socialist Workers Party themselves must have been chagrined and surprised at their lack of standing.

It is, of course, true that it is a perfectly principled tactic to carefully avoid the use of provocative phrases when the legal organizational existence, and possibly the lives of revolutionaries are at stake. However, the words of Dobbs and the *Militant* were not those of a revolutionary Socialist, but rather of Social Democrats and bourgeois liberals, and richly merited the attacks of Gerry Healy and the Socialist Labour League.

The *Revolutionary Tendency* has repeatedly pointed out the attempt to convert the SWP into an appendix of petty-bourgeois radical formations. The abandonment of the concept that the working class and its vanguard must lead the masses, evidently and inevitably leads, at a moment of crisis, to the abandonment of the essence of all revolutionary working-class positions.