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### A note on "(neo-)Shachtmanism"

Submitted by AWL on Thu, 23/01/2014 - 16:47

Marcus's description of us as "neo-Shachtmanite" will probably be a little obscure to most readers. Quite what Marcus intends by adding the prefix "neo" we're not sure, but the term "Shachtmanite" is worth explaining. Max Shachtman, a Polish-Jewish immigrant to America, was a founder and leader of the Trotskyist movement in the United States, part of the original group of Communist Party members expelled in 1929 for supporting Trotsky's Left Opposition. He went on to be one of the foremost theorists and writers of what became the Socialist Workers Party (no relation to the British organisation of the same name).

In 1939, he began to develop differences with Trotsky, and his long-time political collaborator James P Cannon, over perspectives towards the Stalinist states. While Trotsky and Cannon argued that the USSR still represented some form of degenerated or "deformed" working-class rule, Shachtman eventually came to argue that the Stalinist bureaucracy had hardened into a new, distinct class, with its own imperialist ambitions, and that revolutionaries should not defend or side with Stalinism against capitalist imperialism.

Even before Shachtman and co's position had fully developed, a fight on the question split the SWP. "Between the slavery of a degenerated workers state and the slavery of capitalism, we prefer the slavery of a degenerated workers state", argued Albert Goldman, then a supporter of Trotsky's line. In 1940, Shachtman, along with others including Hal Draper and CLR James, founded the Workers Party, which sought to identify and support a "third camp" of independent working-class political organisation and perspective against both capitalism and Stalinism. The slogan "neither Washington nor Moscow but international socialism" came to summarise the "third

camp” policy throughout the Cold War.

A decade later, recoiling in horror from the growing totalitarianism of the Stalinist empire and despairing at the prospects for independent working-class power, Max Shachtman lurched rightward and eventually became, functionally at least, a Cold War liberal, preferring what he saw as the lesser evil of US imperialism to Stalinism, even in its barbaric expression in the Vietnam war.

But the tendency Shachtman founded continued, and a group of his co-thinkers (including Draper, Phyllis and Julius Jacobson, Herman Benson, and others) continued to develop “third camp” politics as a heterodox, broadly-libertarian Trotskyism which emphasised working-class independence and democracy. The third campists had an attitude on the “party question” which no doubt also offends Workers Power’s sensitivities, emphasising debate and dissent, and the rediscovery of the classical-Bolshevik view that internal disagreements should be argued through as publicly as possible, rather than compelling members to lie about their opinions in public.

That is indeed the tradition with which Workers’ Liberty identifies. Identifying with the political tradition Max Shachtman helped develop in no way compels us to apologise for choices he made later on. Against the Shachtman of the mid-1950s, we side with Draper, the Jacobsons, and others, who continued in revolutionary politics until the end of their lives.

But if Marcus intends “Shachtmanite” as a slur, his punch doesn’t land. Against those, like Workers Power, who would still prefer “the slavery of a degenerated workers state” to capitalism, and who would side with clerical-fascist reaction as long as it is incidentally opposed to (western) imperialism, and whose conception of political organisation insists that members lie about their views to retain the appearance of unanimity, we will wear the term “Shachtmanite” as a badge of honour.

-

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The Alliance for Workers' Liberty is an organisation fighting as part of the labour movement for a socialist alternative to both capitalism and Stalinism, based on common ownership and democracy.

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