

14 Charles Lane
New York, N.Y. 10014
December 19, 1973

TO THE POLITICAL COMMITTEE

Dear Comrades,

The attached letter was written by a comrade (now in Philadelphia) who spent a year studying at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. His observations about his experiences in the Swiss section are interesting.

Comradely,

Mary-Alice

COPY

COPY

COPY

December 13, 1973

Dear Rich,

It's about time that I sit down and write what I consider (better late than never) to be a final report on my year spent in Switzerland, despite the fact that I returned on September 16 and here it is December.

It's taken quite a bit of time getting back into things -- job, school, etc. -- and I'm only too glad to also re-involve myself in the life of the YSA. You don't know how great it is, really, to actually be able to sell a paper like the Militant or the YS in the streets again and not have to worry about getting thrown out of the country; the perennial (until the socialist revolution, that is) problem of political activists in a foreign country, eh?

Well, to get down to it, I've been trying to figure out these three months just how to write this. I can't really give the SWP all that good of an insight into the Ligue Marxiste Révolutionnaire (LMR), given my language and political limitations. Due, though, to the great importance (and my interest in it) of the current international debate, which concerns the LMR no less than it concerns the SWP, I'd like to talk about some things I had occasion to witness and experience. They tie in with the debate over the IEC Majority Tendency's European document, and Mary-Alice Waters' criticisms of it. I hesitate to go into this, as my level of political development is not all that high, but one thing I do recognize when I see it is a tendency toward ultraleftism.

I'll start with the January 13, 1973, demonstration in Geneva called by the Comités Indochine Vaincra (CIV). Now, you are aware of the Swiss section's orientation toward antiwar work. As Waters stated in her document, the "concerns of the vanguard" take first priority, and this is of course reflected in slogans, and in the Swiss case, in the name of the antiwar organization itself -- in translation, the Indochina Will Conquer Committees. The united front approach of NPAC is not used; the "multi-issue" approach of the FSI, in France, is preferred. The thing, though, about Geneva that startled me was to see individual members of the LMR break ranks and take part in the downtown rampaging that took place after the demonstration was broken up by the cops; those leading the trashing, fortunately, belonged to some off-the-wall Maoist group, and not our people. One must, I guess, take note of the fact that only "political" targets were selected -- U.S. banks and airlines offices, etc. What was bad news was to have individual Swiss Trotskyists join in on this.

Another "initiative in action" (I guess) of dubious import was a special type of raising of banners; in the first instance between the spires of the cathedral of Lausanne, and in the second instance across a mountain gorge in Fribourg, the city where I was living. In Lausanne, members of the LMR had to lock themselves in the cathedral long enough to be able to climb the spires and stretch a 300 foot banner that read: "For the Victory of the NLF." This banner was visible throughout the entire city, received extensive coverage in the bourgeois press, and caused the LMR to be fined a sum of money for locking themselves inside

the cathedral, and "advertising without a permit." This last charge on the part of the police was ridiculous, but not quite as crazy as the previous conviction of the LMR's paper, La Brèche, for preaching the theory of labor value.

In Fribourg, the banner read: "PRG To Saigon," and coincided with the visit of the South Vietnamese ambassador in Switzerland to the University of Fribourg. For this action the LMR acquired, among other things, the reputation of Alpinists, since the gorge was a dangerous one to hang banners from.

An example of the way members of the LMR work was an event that occurred in Fribourg. At the university there, a certain James Schwarzenback, head of the Swiss National Front, a right-wing coalition that has seized upon the issue of immigrant workers in a racist, demagogic way, was scheduled to speak on the immigration issue. The LMR immediately called on all left groups and individuals to form an anti-fascist committee (Schwarzenbach is characterized by the LMR as fascist) in order to prevent the meeting from taking place. I attended a meeting of this committee, one that was to decide on tactics to be used at the Schwarzenback meeting. Before the strategy meeting though, the LMR had already plastered the university with posters saying that Schwarzenback "must not be permitted to speak": so the LMR was going into the strategy meeting with their minds already made up. At the strategy meeting, representatives from immigrant workers' associations attended, independents, students and the LMR.

The LMR put forward two tactics: the first consisting in shouting down Schwarzenback in an "organized" manner with slogans, chants, etc., for red flags and banners to be smuggled into the meeting and unfurled at the "appropriate" moment. LMR comrades pointed to the likelihood that once they began the "organized commotion" all the others in the room (the audience) would join in and Schwarzenback would thereby be successfully prevented from speaking. Our comrades pointed to the hostility most students, who would most likely attend the meeting, already harbored toward Schwarzenback (which was accurate) in light of his other right-wing positions. When independents at the strategy meeting opposed this tactic on the basis of free speech, they were overruled by comrades of the LMR who chided them about "too much belief in bourgeois democracy," a "reformist attitude" in front of racism and fascism, etc. The immigrant workers' representatives were dubious, but in the end gave in and went along with the LMR views.

I kept silent at this meeting. Although I had not yet read Mary-Alice's document my gut reaction was to say something then and there against the proposed tactic. I did not, though, because of the presence of non-comrades there; since I was known to all as an American Trotskyist, I did not want to embarrass our comrades in front of these independents.

At the Schwarzenback meeting our comrades began the action, shortly after Schwarzenback began to speak; as I expected, no one joined in but a small group of about 10 people. The tactic backfired and turned off the entire assembly (about 300-400 people) so much that our comrades were in danger of being forcibly ejected; when a banner was unfurled it was immediately torn out of the comrades' hands by a person in the audience. At that point, someone grabbed the microphone -- the head of the

Student Government, I believe -- and called for a vote, deciding whether Schwarzenback would be allowed to continue or not. Only our comrades and the group of about 10 people voted against a continuation of the meeting. So the meeting continued; the LMR comrades ended the disruption and sat quiet.

Now, to take you back to the night before, to the strategy meeting of the "anti-fascist committee." A second tactic raised by the LMR was approved by all of the participants: the students, workers' representatives, and independents. It was to be used at the Schwarzenback meeting and was. It consisted in utilizing the question-and-answer period by making a five-minute statement explaining the Ligue's position on Schwarzenback and his anti-immigrant and racist policies. This was actually carried through. At the end of the statement, delivered in a spirited and forthright manner by an LMR comrade, the entire audience broke out into thunderous applause, and it was ironically this second tactic that broke the ice, and caused several students in the audience to then verbally attack Schwarzenback in a similar fashion during the question-and-answer period. One would have to assume that if the first tactic was persisted in, and resulted in the forcible ejection of our comrades from the hall, then the second tactic would have never been used, and the LMR's full position, forcibly presented, would have not been explained in front of over 300 students and professors that night.

I wonder whether a tactic of the first type would greatly assist the YSA in fighting racism, for example, in regards to the series of meetings that Dr. Shockley (of racist-genetics fame) has scheduled at the present. You're aware, no doubt, of the fact that "vanguard elements" here in the US take the LMR approach, or worse, in dealing with this problem -- those known for their "well thought-out" politics, like SDS and PLP, to name a couple.

I'd like now to relate to you another experience concerning the LMR's dealings with the "new mass vanguard." On May 9, 1973, a meeting was organized for all of French-speaking Switzerland in Lausanne by the LMR, an ultraleft group called Break Off For Communism, immigrant workers' organizations (these are Stalinist influenced, due to the strength of the Italian and Spanish CPs), the CIV, and independent activists. At the meeting of about 300 persons, two Cambodian representatives from GRUNK spoke. During and after the presentations of the Cambodian speakers the people in the room responded enthusiastically, even to the slogans calling for the reestablishing of the Cambodian monarchy under Sihanouk. After these representatives of the "royal government" spoke a comrade of the LMR (member of the Political Bureau), who coordinates the LMR's anti-imperialist work in the CIV, gave a basic analysis of the meaning of the Vietnam accords, their relevance to the developing (at that time) Khmer offensive in Cambodia, and the subsequent tasks for revolutionary militants. He correctly called for: continued support to the Indochinese revolutionists, to continue building demonstrations (though not based on the united front, as you know), to stress the considerable complicity of the Swiss government in the imperialist aggression in Indochina, and to help build an international demonstration at Milano, Italy, scheduled May 12, 1973, three days away.

However, during the part in his analysis having to do with the role of the Chinese and Soviet bureaucracies in the process

culminating in the accords, our comrade's militant tone changed suddenly to a more conciliatory one. He verbally bended over backwards, in my opinion, in order not to offend the feelings of anyone in the room. After a long, painful (I imagined at the time) lead-in, he got to the punch-line. Translated literally, it comes out in English: "...and so, we (meaning the LMR) are obligated to say that the Soviet and Chinese governments did not aid the Vietnamese as much as they could have...." What diplomacy! And what generosity! I assume that the comrade could very well have said "...and so, democratic centralism obliges us to say that...." What devotion to the Leninist concept itself! And so the comrade quickly concluded with a call for "unity in action" among all the groups represented in the room. One of the problems, I think, in organizing antiwar work in the manner our Swiss (and French) co-thinkers do lies in the fact that, while in the publications of the CIV (or FSI) Moscow and Peking are characterized as bureaucracies (at least this is so in the case of the CIV), you stop right there -- for fear of offending some component of the "mass vanguard" you're out to reach. So you adapt to their ideas on Moscow and Peking, and end up becoming confused about the nature of Stalinism itself.

I, too, was scheduled to speak for NPAC. While speaking, I made what I admit was an error, by going beyond the boundaries of a representative of NPAC. In discussing the differences in the US between NPAC and Sign Now-ers I took note of the fact that among the latter were CPers, some Maoists, and some McGovernites. And so, in making a distinction between them and NPAC's position of OUT NOW, I said: "We of NPAC, since the 1960s, have consistently maintained the demand of 'OUT NOW' which does not compromise (the struggle) like George McGovern, which does not betray like the bureaucrats in Moscow and Peking, but which continues to fight for the full self-determination for the Indo-chinese peoples." Well, somewhat of an outburst took place; the Maoists and Stalinists in the room (as if Maoists are not Stalinists) jumped to their feet and started shouting at me. I stopped, momentarily, waited for the uproar to die down, and finished my statement. I realized immediately my mistake. The Cambodians were angry, the Swiss comrades were embarrassed, and I was afraid that I had jeopardized a rare drawing-together of many diverse elements in planning common action. But I guess that the whole approach that the LMR-CIV took towards the accords (that they represented a resounding victory, although not total, for the Vietnamese, and by extension, for the rest of the Indo-chinese peoples) and towards those present, angered and confused me. Luckily, I was introduced as a representative of NPAC and not as a member of, much less a representative of, the YSA. But, later on, as I learned and thought about the entire situation in the International and about the conciliationalist attitude our European sections take toward the "new mass vanguard," especially in relation to antiwar work -- where a correct understanding of Stalinism is crucial -- I'm not at all too sorry about that meeting and what I had to say there. I continue, though, to recognize that, strictly speaking, I made a tactical error by bringing in political formulations that are beyond the realm of NPAC (the betrayal role of the Peking and Moscow bureaucracies -- quite a formulation for a united front antiwar organization), and I criticize myself for this. I only regret that the Swiss comrades would probably not understand this and would think that I was trying to "interfere" in their section's

internal affairs, although none of the comrades said anything to me about it afterwards.

Another thing I observed, and I include it in here for information purposes, is the way the LMR elected members to their version of the National Committee at their Congress held May 4-6, 1973, in Lausanne. About 33 comrades were nominated. What the outgoing NC (or Political Bureau, I'm not sure which) did was to list the nominees in a descending order of political maturity or development, starting with Charles A. Udry (Duret) as #1 and on down from there. Taken into account were factors such as experience in the movement; proven political and organizational ability; geographic situation of nominees (e.g., two comrades nominated from my city of Fribourg were rated low and eventually not elected to the NC because Fribourg was not considered important enough politically); and political potential. A major theme of the Congress was: 1) the real lack of any Trotskyist tradition at all in Switzerland (the LMR was founded in 1969), and the resultant absence of any experienced leadership or continuity of leadership; 2) the extreme youthfulness of the LMR (average age about 24). For these reasons, the above method of listing NC nominees was considered valuable; it would give comrades an idea of the importance in choosing a mature and experienced leadership. On the basis of this listing, the outgoing NC (or PB) recommended those it felt qualified to serve on the NC for the coming year. An oral presentation explaining the reasons why each nominee was listed in such or such a numbered position took place. A full discussion was held, and voting took place.

So, that's about it for a summation of my year's observations (include here my previous letters throughout the year). I hope these reports have been helpful; it doesn't seem to me that too many comrades at all know anything about the Swiss section or conditions in Switzerland; I hope my reports shed some light. For myself, my time spent overseas was certainly fruitful.

Comradely greetings,
s/Mike Finley