Facts, Models, and Arguments on NWRC Literature Policy

I. Facts.

A. Major struggle occurred in 1975 around Trotskyism. At that time we allowed sale of certain papers (Workers World), others in the library (Militant), and others were regarded as sectarian and to be ignored (Workers Vanguard, Torch).
   1. Subfact: the ignored groups were considered entitled to our support under attack by the state, unlike NCLC.
   2. Subfact 2: the justification given for not having the papers of the ignored groups was that we "do not consider it possible or worthwhile to work with these groups".

B. Our position in support of MPLA in 1975-76 meant that pro-Unita or pro-FNLA literature was outside the bounds, though I'm not sure we had any that we threw out. But we kept in the library and on sale papers of groups supporting the Chinese view of liberation movements, which while not denying MPLA some legitimacy, did in practice sharply contradict our view. This was recognized as such and challenged at one point by a pro-MPLA member, but the papers were retained by a 12-1 vote.

C. In our recent Eritrea decision, literature dedicated to opposing that struggle is out of bounds (again little if any to actually throw out; one Workers World pamphlet was rejected earlier as unreliable factually by the Literature Committee) but literature about Ethiopia which submerges the issue (Raul Valdes Vivo's book) is allowed.

D. A few years ago we moved the left papers from a more conspicuous spot to their present location within the store so that they would still be available while not appearing to be the main focus of our sales effort.

E. We have allowed views of parties, etc., to have the benefit of the doubt for consignment orders, i.e., they can be put out on the shelves, but if someone objects, the particular party organ must be voted in or out. Several (Unite!) have made it into the store via this route; one that didn't was PLP which was voted down, but retained in the library. Also voted down was COUSMI's paper, with its pro-Unita stand and lack of redeeming social(ist) value.

II. Arguments

1) The need for a more consistent policy is felt—is RCP that different from PL? To outsiders our decision process is both too long and incomprehensible—we appear capricious or sectarian.

2) Actually the record shows we are reasonably consistent in being willing to exclude a particular view in order to define a political stand that enough people think is important. Here is a key to "why we endorse certain liberation movements"—we need at times to clarify things to ourselves and others by taking a stand, and both Angola and Eritrea have significance beyond the case in point, namely a) we must support deserving movements whether or not China does, and b)ditto for the USSR.

3) At the same time we have always refrained from a total ban on material which may be useful or relevant but contains as a secondary aspect a view we strongly oppose. When holding up an issue of Keep Strong until we wrote up our reply to their article on Cook County Hospital, we didn't ban them across the board.
4) I think an overall approach can be defined which will accord with points 1-3 above but will lead to some extension of what is carried in the store, while retaining the "right to rebel" against what we feel is offensive or untimely. It would be: to allow consignment sale of at least one newspaper and one journal of each acknowledged left party or grouping, or one key document of those which do not have papers or journals, even if we aren't going to be working with them on anything.

This would still exclude the NCIC or any group we do not consider part of the left at all. It would let us avoid being deluged by papers of prolific tendencies given our limited space, since other material would be decided on its merits or lack thereof. It would not prevent an embargo of a particular issue, or more preferably, a reply by us as in the case of Keep Strong. It also would not commit us to taking pamphlets, such as the RCP's Cuba pamphlet, since each is a one time situation in itself, and in the case of RCP, their line is represented. So it would not prevent that political expression of the collective from defining positions considered unacceptable.

At the same time, it would allow some restricted expression of the view of any tendency with a shred of legitimacy, so none could claim they were being censored. It would give a small stake in the store to the groups we now reject, which might lead to some of them utilizing the store and perhaps coming into contact with other views. If it were done, it would have to be done on a universal basis, even if it is a tendency that attacks us politically like the MLN and its supporters. It would be put forward as our guarantee of that degree of openness, subject to the specific embargo of an issue so we can reply to it. It would be more comprehensible by far than our current policy to outsiders.

We would of course retain the right to deal with disruptive tendencies as laid down in the struggle on Trotskyism, and we could put up a notice that we do not necessarily endorse the views in the left papers. This would be obvious anyway since they are mutually incompatible. By carrying one and all we would be less likely to be accused of political favoritism.

5) In addition, the principle of giving some hearing to all left views would be a reflection of what would have to be decided in a socialist "new world". There is an issue of what freedom of the press and information would mean under socialism. We do in fact serve as a guardian of the socialist heritage, and that heritage has been flawed by abuses of party power to restrict legitimate opposition as well as (or in the name of) restricting counterrevolutionary views. Is there anyone else on the left in Chicago standing up for any principle other than that of the party's views being allowed and all else suspect?

6) The question must arise: what are the boundaries of the left? For NWRC in 1975, it was implicitly who we would be working with on some issues at least, as opposed to those we wouldn't. I think this is too narrow in 1980 because a) we're less of an action collective with a particular focus than we were, and more of an "institution on the left", and b) we can learn something from those we won't work with. Who will say that in STO's overestimation of nationalism and opposition to "white skin privilege" that there is nothing to be considered, nothing worth reading even if it is rejected? We should not be smug. If a few comrades can garner
details of interleft conflicts by reading Workers Vanguard in the aisles at Barbara's bookstore, can't this be available to NWRC members in general, and to the public on an equal basis, not just kept in the library where few will ever notice? It is not subversive to the struggle to let truths and errors reveal themselves in open ideological combat!

7) The alternate impulse can also be defined: to decide what we really agree with and to carry only that. In the area of left periodicals, that means RCP and the Call are indefensible, also Workers World and the CLP. We would still have the NNMLC and the Guardian and OCIC, but if we take a position on Afghanistan or Kampuchea, one or more of these should be excluded as well! The logic here leads to the "party bookstore of a new type", i.e., this one will have the correct line. Of course the staff will be reduced after the various splits occur, but with higher unity they will have more energy and actually do more than in the old petty bourgeois store... There are areas of struggle in which the search for a high degree of unity is principled and correct, but I submit that operating a left bookstore in a major capitalist city with the intended audience including the independent left, workers, and oppressed groups in general, is not one of them. Not only is this model dubious for pragmatic economic reasons, it is also wrong in principle because the model of reading only the correct summations of correct line is fundamentally incapable of educating cadres and cannot lead to social transformation.

It is agreed that we have never adopted this model in the past, but people do confuse the struggle for the correct line with the literature policy question, and this is one reason for discomfort with carrying the incorrect lines in the store.

8) The alternative also exists to go on as before. This would not be catastrophic since we have survived until now without a clearly defined literature policy toward left groups. But the problems we have will persist: lack of clarity leading to the same issues coming up over and over again, the appearance of inconsistency and the actuality of long delays in decision making, the view internally that we are non-sectarian coupled with the outside perception of us as sectarian, the need to go outside the store to look for information not found inside, and most of all, the lack of a clearly defined principled approach that members can agree upon and put forward, which distinguishes us from the commercial bookstores and the party bookstores alike, and we hope points the way forward to the socialist bookstore of the future.