How the Socialist Workers Party (US) changed its line on the Elian Gonzalez case

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The Socialist Workers Party did not arrive at its public opposition to the rescue of Elian Gonzalez overnight. Its political line underwent a distinct evolution, which can be followed in the pages of the *Militant* over the six months since Elian Gonzalez was found floating in the Atlantic Ocean on Thanksgiving Day.

The issue was first noted in the *Militant* dated December 13. For the next three months there were articles on the case in every issue, although they were somewhat perfunctory considering the usual prominence of Cuban events in that newspaper. These articles were uniformly critical of the Miami relatives and the US government and supported the Cuban government's demand that Elian be immediately returned to his father in Cuba.

Significantly, however, the subject of Elian Gonzalez never appeared on the front page of the *Militant* and there were no public meetings or Militant Labor Forums in any city on the issue. A single editorial appeared January 24, condemning "the Clinton administration's outrageous refusal to return the six-year-old Cuban boy, Elian Gonzalez, to his own country and to his father."

In the February 7 issue a substantial article by Argiris Malapanis appeared as the page 3 lead, under the headline, "US officials stall on returning Cuban boy." The article stated: "The Clinton administration was not inclined to send US marshals to remove the boy by force from where he is staying in Little Havana, given expected physical opposition by right-wingers here." It should be noted that this statement diametrically contradicts the *Militant*'s later claim of "the virtual absence of the armed counterrevolutionary organizations" around the home of Lazaro Gonzalez.

The article went on to link the Elian Gonzalez case to the ongoing political crisis within the US ruling elite: "What has developed around the Elian Gonzalez case is similar to other examples of unanticipated initiatives by right-wing politicians or wings of the ruling class to openly challenge and undercut the foreign policy course of the White House." The writer then mentioned the speech by Jesse Helms at the UN Security Council, the voting down of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the recriminations over Clinton's amnesty of Puerto Rican political prisoners, and the impeachment campaign.

Without exaggerating the merits of the article, it was an attempt to provide a political context for evaluating the significance of the Elian Gonzalez case, while acknowledging certain basic facts—the threats of violence from the supporters of the Miami relatives, the influence of Cuban exiles in right-wing circles in Washington, and the cringing of the Clinton administration before these elements. These are all facts which the SWP would later seek to deny.

The next issue, February 14, contained an article reporting a picket set up in Miami by supporters of returning the child to Cuba. But that was the last article on the Elian Gonzalez for several months. The next nine issues of the *Militant* contain only a single brief report of a court decision, even as the case drew increasing public attention in the United States.

Finally, on April 17, the *Militant* published a lengthy front-page article on an SWP meeting in Chicago at which nearly every branch was represented, where party leader Mary-Alice Waters gave a report on her recent trip to the Havana book fair. This included a long account of discussions with Cubans about the Elian Gonzalez case which introduced some of the main themes elaborated in the May 8 denunciation of the INS raid.

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Waters claimed, "The INS and the forces Clinton represents are trying to use this case to improve the image of the immigration cops among workers.... We explained why it is not in the interests of working people in the United States that the INS strengthen its prerogative to issue administrative rulings that cannot be challenged in the courts.... That is what the US rulers have been trying to establish in law since Clinton signed the immigration reform bill in 1996.... We kept explaining that in the imperial United States, a powerful, 'decisive' executive branch is not something in the interests of working people. Far from being progressive, it is our great historic enemy, worldwide."

The next issue of the *Militant* carried a further attempt to develop this line. A column in response to a reader's inquiry asserted that it was wrong to emphasize the issue of Juan Miguel Gonzalez's right as the surviving father to be reunited with his son:

"Class-conscious workers state clearly that parental rights in the abstract should not be held above the rights of children—the most defenseless members of society.

"The abuses that children suffer—including violence, sexual assault, and the opposition on the part of some parents to state-provided education or health care—are manifestations of the brutality and lack of solidarity that characterize the capitalist social order. Working people demand that the state intercede on behalf of children in such cases."

The commentary in the *Militant* was virtually identical to the spurious argument raised by the three-judge panel of the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals, which gave the same example of parental refusal to provide health care on religious grounds as part of its finding that Juan Miguel's rights as a parent did not preclude an independent asylum application by his six-year-old son.

The next week, in the issue dated May 1, the last published before the raid, came indications that the new line on Elian Gonzalez was causing a considerable crisis for the SWP. The *Militant* carried a three-page article on a congress of Latin American students in Havana, only briefly mentioning discussion of the Elian Gonzalez case. The article reported, "Castro devoted a major portion of his April 5 speech on the details of this case, including the announcement that Juan Miguel Gonzalez would soon be leaving for Washington, DC in pursuit of his son the next morning." But not a word of Castro's speech was quoted, in a newspaper which serves as a virtual house organ for the Cuban president.

One final circumstance underscores the abruptness of the change of line after February 7.

The February 14 issue of the *Militant* also contains an announcement of the type frequently carried in the SWP journal reporting personnel changes. It reports that Argiris Malapanis, the writer of the previous week's article on the Elian Gonzalez case, and *Militant* editor Naomi Craine, who presumably approved the article's publication, had been sent out to work in the provinces. Craine was assigned to a branch-building team in the Carolinas, while Malapanis, who is fluent in Spanish, went to work in a garment shop in Miami.

The suddenness of the action suggests that the shakeup in the staff was in reaction to the February 7 article and was bound up with a decision by SWP leader Jack Barnes to impose a change in line. This conclusion is further strengthened by the announcement, in the May 22 *Militant*, that Craine's replacement as editor, Greg McCartan, was leaving the newspaper after a barely three-month stint as editor, to head the SWP's 2000 election campaign.

The coup-like character of the change in line—an abrupt reversal of position, together with the purging of those who might get in the way—only underscores the diseased internal regime in the SWP, which has long been reduced to a rump consisting essentially of the cult followers of Jack Barnes and his wife Mary-Alice Waters.

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