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Open Letter to Socialist Alternative and 15 Now PDX

By CLASS STRUGGLE WORKERS - PORTLAND

On Sunday, May 17, following a film showing sponsored by 15 Now PDX and Socialist Alternative about the struggle of immigrant workers in New York, Justin Norton-Kertson, the main spokesman for 15 Now PDX and a supporter of Socialist Alternative, physically attacked one of our comrades, tearing papers out of his hand, ripping one up and throwing it on the ground. Norton-Kertson proceeded to threaten further physical violence, repeatedly threatened to call the police, and repeatedly made vile sexist remarks to female trade unionists who objected to his aggression, threats and torrent of abuse. Class Struggle Workers - Portland denounces this egregious violation of workers democracy, and we hold you responsible.

Class Struggle Workers had important points to make about the film being screened, *The Hand That Feeds*, on the struggle of the workers at the Hot and Crusty bakery that won a contract and union hiring hall. The initial target of your supporter's attack, Alex, spoke about how he had been an active participant in that struggle, being on the H&C workers' picket line for almost every one of the 55 days it lasted. He said that the struggle there was an inspiration to us because it shows what workers can do, even under difficult circumstances (such as lacking the documents required by the bosses' government), when they rely on their own class power. The Hot and Crusty workers didn't have anything to do with the Democratic Party, didn't wait for the Labor Department to do things for them, didn't go begging to City Hall or expect elections to change things. They stuck it out on the picket line, brought out the support of other NYC unions, and they won.

He also spoke about the struggle of immigrant workers in Pasco, Washington, where Mexican worker Antonio Zambrano-Montes was gunned down by the police with his hands up. He told how the CSWP won several Portland unions to condemn this racist murder and to march on May Day under a banner saying "Labor Against Racist Police Murder," emphasizing that the only power that can stop the murderous police is the multiracial working class fighting for revolution to do away with the racism inherent in American capitalism. Alex, a supporter of the Internationalist Group and union member of ILWU Local 5 in Portland, contrasted the class-struggle strategy of the H&C workers with electoralist strategies, such as that of Socialist Alternative and 15 Now to win an increase in the minimum wage through ballot initiatives, which rely on the Democratic Party. He pointed out how the leaders of his own union used this as an excuse for negotiating a sellout

contract. He also noted Socialist Alternative's support for a presidential campaign by Democrat Bernie Sanders, and in the past for immigrant-basher and opponent of abortion rights Ralph Nader.

This political critique apparently was enough to send Norton-Kertson into a frenzy. Our comrade had seemingly violated the first commandment of opportunist lash-ups everywhere, "thou shalt not criticize." After the event as Alex was selling *The Internationalist* outside the theater where the event took place, your supporter came up to him and started ranting, telling him to get out. After our comrade pointed out that the sidewalk didn't belong to him, Norton-Kertson grabbed a paper out of his hand, tore it up and threw it on the ground, saying this was what he thought of our politics and if we came to 15 Now events again "I will beat the shit out of you." Alex responded calmly that we do not condone violence in the labor movement, whereupon Norton-Kertson stormed back into the theater.

A unionist attending the event who came out upon hearing the commotion then went inside to complain to Norton-Kertson that he shouldn't lay hands on someone because of a disagreement, saying he was acting like a child. (Norton-Kertson later responded by calling the unionist "daddy.") Norton-Kertson then followed his critic back outside, threatening to call the police. This was a menace to everyone there, particularly at an event where there were a number of undocumented immigrants present who are particularly vulnerable to police repression. A woman trade unionist, an officer of the Portland Industrial Workers of the World, was outraged at the threat to call the cops against a member of the workers movement and loudly objected. Norton-Kertson grotesquely responded by telling her to perform oral sexual acts on different parts of his male anatomy. This shocked just about everyone present. Those interested can find the actual words this evidently deranged misogynist used in various postings on Facebook. Should he attempt to deny the facts, we have an extended cellphone recording in which his disgusting insults and threats can be clearly heard.

You can also hear a female construction union militant reacting incredulously to his sexist slurs and threats to call the cops. Your woman-hating rep is seen smirking as he responded to criticism from several bystanders, sneeringly repeating that they did nothing and would never be anything in Portland. People respond saying how dare he say that, there are ironworkers, stage hands, painters, "we are all unionists here," including members of the IWW which was credited in the film (as is the Internationalist Group). And the initial target of his assault, in addition to being seen in the film on the picket line at Hot and Crusty has been fighting for his union to demand \$15 an hour and more. Norton-Kertson's taunt against the trade unionists who denounced his ranting and threats - "you're done in this town" - would more accurately apply to this foul-mouthed sexist

Subsequently, Alex and Becca of CSWP stayed for several minutes speaking to several students from the alternative student newspaper *Rearguard* at Portland State University who came out asking to interview Alex about Hot and Crusty, since he had spoken in the meeting about how he directly participated in that struggle. As our comrades then walked back to their car, they passed by Norton-Kerston who, apparently unable to contain himself, yelled at our comrade that she should perform an oral sex act on yet a third part of his male anatomy. When comrade Becca called him a "sexist," he challenged her to beat him up. She declined.

It should go without saying that such actions have no place in the workers movement, and if tolerated can only bring discredit to the left. That they were carried out by a self-proclaimed organizer at an event about struggles of immigrant workers, whose campaigns denounce rampant sexist abuse and harassment is nothing short of a disgrace.

Since the incident Sunday night, Norton-Kertson and associated opportunists have been scrambling to defend his intolerable actions, while constantly changing their story. First they claim that our comrade only criticized the organization that invited the CSWP to speak, which as indicated earlier is utterly false. Their second line of defense is that your man was “upset that a group who asked to be included as a speaker – presumably in support of the content of the event – spent their speaking time denouncing the organizers of the event” (Facebook posting by Shamus Cooke of Workers Action). Yet precisely because we have deep differences with the politics and strategy of Socialist Alternative/15 Now, CSWP asked – both in writing and in phone calls before the event – to have its name removed as a sponsoring group, which was done. To claim that we spoke “under false pretenses,” as Norton-Kertson says in a Facebook post, is utterly disingenuous.

A third defense from Norton-Kertson, in the same Facebook post, was that in the middle of his tirade, “That’s when I got called a fag, and replied by inviting them to do sexually explicit things to my backside.” The part about a derogatory homophobic remark being made is a flat-out lie – none of our comrades would or did say it, nor is it in the recording which covers that entire episode. The next day when a member of CSWP (who was not at the event) called up an acquaintance in Socialist Alternative to ask who supposedly made such a remark, they were unable to say who it was. Norton-Kertson himself then sent a text message to the comrade and said that someone unknown had used the anti-gay slur against him and he “lost his temper.” Again, this is a pure invention. No such remark was made, and the video shows him as a sneering, smirking male chauvinist thoroughly enjoying taunting the women workers who objected to his threats with his sexist slurs.

Moreover, in other Facebook posts over the next several hours, Socialist Alternative/15 Now organizer Norton-Kertson repeatedly brags about threatening to call the cops, saying that in order “to rile up a bunch of so-called ‘socialists,’ who are at an event for no reason but to trash on everyone there,” all you have to do is:

“Tell them you are going to call the cops if they don’t leave. You don’t have to mean it, you just have to say it and watch the superiority complex do it’s [sic] work. I don’t give a shit how uncool threatening to call cops is. It was worth it to watch their faces turn red with disbelief and anger. I have my moments...”

Grooving on his threats and slurs, in another posting Norton-Kertson repeats, “it felt good to piss them off that much.” He has apparently since taken down those posts, perhaps trying to cover his tracks, but we have screen shots of them.

We do not presume that Socialist Alternative authorized one of its supporters to engage in such misogynistic antics. His vicious tantrum appeared to us and others to be that of someone out of control. However, he is one of yours, and thus you are responsible for his actions. We have not exaggerated in the least, nor have we repeated his vile remarks, although they were witnessed and objected to by a number of people who have provided signed statements. We also have the cellphone video in which Norton-Kertson’s threats and filthy verbal abuse can be clearly heard, and are prepared to make it public if need be. For that matter, several of your comrades wearing Socialist Alternative t-shirts witnessed it and can confirm what we have said here, unless they have also personally degenerated so far that they have no regard for truth. The fact that they stood by and said nothing at the time speaks volumes. If anyone associated with us had done anything half as vile as your supporter did, we would have stopped it instantly.

Any self-respecting socialist organization would expel someone who attacked a member of the workers movement by tearing papers out of his hands, ripping them and throwing them on the ground, threatening to beat him and to call the police while repeatedly slinging women trade unionists with graphic sexist slurs. What group would want to be represented by someone exhibiting such vile behavior, or even be known for harboring the likes of Justin Norton-Kertson? His actions bring discredit on anyone associated with him. Any group with an ounce of proletarian morality would also issue a formal apology to those who were the target of his ranting, threats and aggression. But we don't expect any such response from an organization like Socialist Alternative that considers cops to be workers and whose British mentors organize prison guards. It is little wonder that their representative would threaten to call the police.

We have spoken with a worker at the theater, who after witnessing the aggression by Norton-Kertson and his threats to call the police told him to leave. We assured the theater management that this kind of intolerable behavior was not representative of the workers movement in Portland, and that their desire to have the theater be a place for open debate and discussion was laudable and appreciated. We are firm believers in workers democracy. When we hold a public forum, those in the audience who wish to speak are free to say their piece within the time allotted, and we don't go around physically attacking them afterwards. In fact, at a film showing sponsored by CSWP in February, a supporter of Socialist Action spoke from the floor, saying a number of things we disagreed with, sold his paper outside without incident and had a beer with us afterwards, where we discussed our political differences (which are as great as those we have with Socialist Alternative).

We defend workers democracy, and are quite capable of defending it for ourselves. If we chose not to respond to the incredible provocations on Sunday night, it was just that, a choice. People can clearly see who was the aggressor, and how vile his behavior was. In the future, Mr. Norton-Kertson would be well-advised to watch his mouth and the filth and threats that spill out of it, especially with regards to women and our comrades. Members of CSWP and the Internationalist Group as an organization have participated in and organized numerous united-front actions with groups they have fundamental differences with, including Socialist Alternative, always ensuring that while united on a central demand or demands, each tendency is free to put forward its own program. But we will not put up with attempts at intimidation, sexist abuse, or attempts to silence the revolutionary program.

In closing, we will briefly restate the differences that your organizer sought to silence. The comrades who formed Class Struggle Workers – Portland are hardly do-nothing critics. We have been actively involved in, and often organized, just about every action of labor solidarity in the area for a number of years. But we have seen from our own experience how the pro-capitalist labor bureaucracy sells out one struggle after another. We also see today, as so often in the past, how their “left” hangers-on help them in this. 15 Now is actually calling (in its ballot initiative) for *\$15 later* (in 2019) because the bureaucrats and Democrats wouldn't go along. As for Socialist Alternative, it is a social-democratic left group whose whole reason for being is to pressure the capitalist state. Socialist Alternative stands for class collaboration, CSWP stands for class struggle. The Hot and Crusty struggle won precisely because it based itself on the latter, not the former. That's the difference in a nutshell.

Class Struggle Workers – Portland
May 21, 2015