

III. BUILD THE PARTY IN THE HEAT OF THE CLASS

STRUGGLE: GRASP THE KEY LINK; POLITICAL LINE

Communists and Advanced Workers in the Working Class Movement

In this section we will discuss the relationship between party building and the spontaneous working class movement and the relationship of each to the development of political line. Advanced workers are the natural leaders of the working class who everywhere have set the tone of the mass movement. When won to communism they provide the strongest link in the fusion of the working class with the communist movement. Bolshevik, in its typically one-sided way, reduced the relationship of communists to the spontaneous movement by making advanced workers the only link. Communists are to virtually withdraw from all mass activity. This is not immediately evident on reading the journal. On this question, as on many others, the Bolshevik's overwhelming vagueness creeps in; directives are hinted at rather than openly stated; much must be inferred from what is not discussed, almost as much as from what is laid out.

Three statements define the Bolshevik's view on the relationship of advanced workers and communists to the mass movement in this period. These are statements about how the advanced determine the character of the mass movement. Bolshevik instructs us to "spread the results of our theoretical work among the independent leaders of the working class and through them to the class as a whole..." (p.22, emphasis added). They say that "advanced workers.. are the target of our agitation and propaganda in this period, those who, when armed with MLMTT, can change the character of the workers movement from spontaneous to conscious." (p.29) And finally "we uphold our main form of work is propaganda to the advanced. It means that we work to develop study groups of advanced workers, put out leaflets, newspapers, theoretical journals, consistently carry out independent propaganda work in mass activities that we engage in." (p.34)

This is all we are told about what to do in the mass movement. The only mention of work in the mass movement is the last quoted passage. But no specific content or direction is given to this work by the journal, except to win over the advanced. There is not a single mention in the whole journal of mass agitation.

The Bolshevik is objectively saying, even though it does not say so explicitly, that communists should virtually withdraw from the mass movement, and that the only work we should do in the mass movement should be with the advanced.

Now the role the Bolshevik says belongs to the advanced is indeed their role; they are the independent leaders of the working class. But this is raised one-sidedly as if they were the only leaders of the class, as if communists have no role to play in the day-to-day struggles of the working class. We agree that the main form of work in this period must be communist propaganda to win over the advanced, but this is done in the context of providing day-to-day ideological and political leadership of the class struggle and with communist agitation to back it up. RWL's line on this would sever the links that communists must have with the masses in order to build a real vanguard Party.

RWL's line is nothing but simple abstentionism, and RWL rests the whole argument on a quote from Stalin in which he says that the Russian Party, in its first period of development, "focused its attention and care upon the party itself, upon its own existence and preservation." (p.33) Bolshevik takes the quote without grasping its meaning; it reduces the meaning of the phrase "focused attention and care upon the party itself" to mean that the party dealt with itself alone. This falsification of Russian history leads directly to the line that party building is not the central task but that it is the central and only task, the sectarian view underlying most of Bolshevik's views on what the role of communists should be in the mass movement. (In fact they stated this in the most recent copy of Palante, June 1976).

Lenin was completely clear on communist work among the urban proletariat, in 1897, when the RSDLP was not yet formed and Russian Social Democracy "only just beginning to develop its practical activity." (ICL 2:345)

"The socialist activities of Russian Social Democrats consist in spreading among the workers a proper understanding of the present social and economic system, its basis and its development, an understanding of the various classes of the role of the working class in this struggle, of its attitude towards the declining and the developing classes, towards the past and the future of capitalism, and understanding of the historical task of international Social Democracy and of the Russian working class. Inseparably connected with propaganda is agitation among the workers, which naturally comes to the forefront in the present political conditions of Russia and at the present level of development of the masses of workers. Agitation among the workers

means that the Social Democrats take part in all spontaneous manifestations of the working class struggle, in all the conflicts between the workers and the capitalists over the work ing day, wages, working conditions, etc., etc.,... to develop among the workers consciousness of their solidarity, consciousness of the common interests and common cause of all the Russian workers as a united working class that is part of the international army of the proletariat... study circles... proper and secret connections between them and the central group of Social Democrats,... working class literature,... organize the receipt of correspondance... publish agitational leaflets and manifestoes and ... distribute them... train a body of experienced agitators..." (LCW 2:329)

This view, that we are supposed to be engaged only in party building in this period is a rigid theory of stages, as if we are supposed to first consolidate the support of the vanguard in isolation from the mass movement and then, once this process is completed, turn our attention, and that of our isolated "vanguard," to focus on the mass movement. This is sheer madness! Already in 1895, three years before the First Party Congress was held, and a full ten years before Stalin said the "first period" of the party was completed and the vanguard had been won to communism,

"Lenin put before the League of Struggle the task of forming closer connections with the mass working class movement and of giving it political leadership. Lenin proposed to pass from the propaganda of Marxism among the few politically advanced workers who gathered in the propaganda circles to political agitation among the broad masses of the working class on issues of the day. This turn toward mass agitation was of profound importance for the subsequent development of the working class movement in Russia... Under Lenin's guidance, the St. Petersburg League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the orking Class was the first body in Russia that began to unite socialism with the working class movement." (History of the CPSU(B), p.16-17, emphasis in the original)

RWL, on the other hand, in sharp contrast to this clear advice, leaves us only with a muddle. But more, they preach abstentionism, a withdrawal from the mass movement because anything one will do in the mass movement can only be "spontaneous," not conscious, and hence, opportunist. So rather than risk making errors the comrades in the RWL would rather sit in their isolated little study groups talking about "pure" politics. The comrades mistakenly view the whole of the mass movement as being economist, that any work with anyone who is not advanced is "bowing to spontaneity," that any task besides building the party in the narrowest sense is of no significance. Lenin must not have been aware that he was in the first period of the party, where the work of party building is "the central and the only" task.

To see how completely cut off from the working class movement the RWL would have us be, we need only to look at the advice they give communists on work in the trade unions, the basic organizations of the class. There is absolutely none! They either mean for us to withdraw entirely from any form of mass practice or they hope that the correct position on work in the trade unions will emerge spontaneously, "as fusion develops," no doubt.

The fusion which took place in Russia between the developing party and the industrial working class took place through communist involvement in the mass struggles of the workers, not just on the basis of isolated propaganda circles of the advanced. Agitation was a central aspect of the Russian Marxists' work. In fact, Lenin points out in "Retrograde Trend," the key article concerning the question of winning the advanced, that agitation on a mass scale is necessary to identify and to win over the advanced. As he describes it, "From propaganda they began to go over to widespread agitation. Widespread agitation, naturally, brought to the forefront a growing number of class conscious advanced workers." (LCW 6:270, emphasis added)

In sum, the RWL rests its formula for the withdrawal of communists from the mass movement on a distortion of Russian revolutionary history, on a single quote which they tear out of its historical context and use to construct a false system of views. Based on this they conclude that the central task is the only task.

RWL Fails To Grasp How Political Line is the Key Link, and How this Leads to Winning The Advanced

The last section looked at how the RWL has no grasp of the role of communists in the mass movement during the period of party formation. But this is no isolated error. Rather it is a part of a system of distortions and confusion that is put forth as "the correct line." (Bolshevik, p.18)

Political line is the key link in party building at this time, and our major form of work is propaganda to the advanced. What is the relationship between the development of political line to the winning of the advanced to communism? How does political line struggle lead to winning over the advanced? Let's once again look at the Russian experience.

What exactly was going on in Russia at the time Stalin said that the class conscious vanguard was won to communism in 1905?

Workers close to the Party had been "exceedingly dissatisfied", (LCW 10:37) up to 1905, with the split between the two trends; the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks had already been divided and struggling over organizational questions for over two years. Many of the advanced workers, who then as now have the interests of the class as a whole at heart, saw the split as quibbling, as unnecessarily dividing the ranks of the working class. But the rising tide of the revolution in 1905 mobilized the broad masses and brought out the full meaning of the lines of demarcation.

The division between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks over tactics were an immediate question which reflected all the other differences between the two trends; the Bolsheviks stood for revolution and for the leading role of the proletariat while the Mensheviks were for a bourgeois democratic revolution with the proletariat playing only the role of supporter of the liberal bourgeoisie. Only the Bolshevik tactics, promulgated in 1905 at the IIIrd Party Congress led the way forward for the class conscious workers and the entire working class.

The circumstances facing the Russian party at that time were also such that the question of political line was the key link to moving the struggle ahead; what political line would move forward the party and the whole class; what political line would move forward all of Russia toward socialist revolution? Lenin's Two Tactics answered these questions. These were adopted as the strategic and tactical line of the Bolsheviks at the IIIrd Party Congress.

The advanced picked up the tactics of the Bolsheviks and they, under the Bolsheviks' guidance and in the Party as Bolsheviks themselves, led the class forward in the revolution of 1905. The Mensheviks were discredited as their strategic and tactical line was openly exposed as counter revolutionary.

Advanced workers were not consolidated first in propaganda circles away from the class struggle and then moved into battle with the Tsar. Advanced workers were studying, as they study today, in order to answer the questions facing the working class; they were in the heat of the class struggle. Likewise communists did not focus only on the advanced workers and, once the advanced were consolidated, turn toward the mass movement. Communists were leading the mass upsurges.

In order to understand how political line as key link can help us win the advanced today we must first look at what exactly is political line. Politics is that sphere of ideology that concerns the relations between classes and the state. It is one of the main aims of the party programme to define these relations scientifically and on that basis to set the goals for the movement of the proletariat through a given phase of its development and through a given stage of the revolution. Depending on these relations, the strategy and tactics are formulated. Thus, political line consists of the programme, strategy and tactics of the party.

In Russia, political line was key to winning over the vanguard because it was on the basis of the correct political line that the class struggle was moved ahead and the Bolsheviks were shown to be upholding the real and general interests of the working class in practice. Lenin was able to say, then that "there is now a clearer and more definite line of demarcation between the right wing and the left wing of Social Democracy." (LCW 10:376) The Bolsheviks could not have won over the class conscious vanguard in isolation from the mass movement.

It is in this way that the Bolshevik reveals that it really does not understand what it means to say that the struggle over political line is the key link in party building in this period. The journal is no "Bolshevik" at all.

RWL's View of The Key Link Takes The Link From The Chain

While we agree that in this period of party building the key link is political line, RWL's position leaves many unanswered questions. Their journal does not make clear the difference between the earlier period, when ideology was the key link and the current period; nor does it make clear why the last period developed into this period.

The RWL does not even have a clear view on the definition of political line, ("the concrete application of MLMTT to the burning class questions of today." (Bolshevik, p.18) They fail to lay out how politics is a feature of ideology, and how the struggle over political line further sharpens the ideological line of demarcation in the movement. Also, they fail to point out that political line, in particular, concerns itself with the struggle for and relationship to political (state) power of the various classes. These are questions of strategy and tactics. Politics is a major aspect of programme. Their view departs even further from MLMTT when we see how it comes down in practice. As we discussed above, they see political line being used to win over the advanced workers and to unite M-L's outside the context of the mass struggles of the working class. This is their first and less important error in the view of the development of political line. The second and more serious deviation is the failure to place party building on the proletarian ideological plane, as we discussed in the first section.

RWL reveals by this that it has no real understanding of the concept of key link. A key link is what will move the whole process ahead. It is not the exclusive task, as RWL would now have us believe. This is just another example of the one-sidedness that characterizes their whole methodology.

Party building must be conducted in the heat of the class struggle, in the context of the mass movement, in order to link theory with practice, to test developing political line, to focus our theoretical work by adapting it to answer the needs of the cause, and in order to be able to use political line to win over the advanced.

The struggle for political line is a struggle against opportunism, and in order to effectively combat all forms of opportunism, struggle must be conducted on the proletarian ideological plane. We must deepen criticisms and self criticisms to their ideological roots or we will only keep repeating the same old errors in new forms. We saw how the failure to deepen the criticism of the vulgar proletarianization line led to its recurrence in the RWL on the question of the origin of the science and the relation of the development of the science to the process of fusion. RWL has also gone through several mutations of their Bourgeois Nationalism, as we have shown. In this situation, RWL's view of WVO's "spending most time on ideology... is a right line" is like a drowning man turning down a life saver. It is absurd for RWL to say that WVO's spending "great amounts of time on the question of ideology" is to underestimate the level of development that has occurred in the concrete struggles against revisionism, and other forms of bourgeois ideology." (p.22)

By taking party building and the struggle for the correct political line off the proletarian ideological plane and out of the context of the mass movement, RWL takes the link from the chain and breaks the chain. It can only end by building itself into an isolated sect. It is incorrect to say, then, as the Bolshevik does, that it has "a correct line on key link"; it's not enough just to say political line is key, one has to understand what this means and to demonstrate it if we are to agree that they have the "correct line". It is also incorrect to say this line on key link provides "scope and orientation to our work." (p.31) Rather their line divorces political line from the mass movement and from MLMTT.