

Proletarian Unity League

2, 3, Many Parties of a New Type? Against the Ultra-Left Line

Chapter 2: The Danger from the "Left" G. Whose Spontaneity, Whose Economism?

The "Lefts" charge that the communist movement bows to spontaneity, and that this shows the dominance of right opportunism. The comrades of the League for Proletarian Revolution (M-L) write for example that:

"The main danger to the communist movement at this time is right opportunism, revisionism, which in the working class movement mainly takes the form of economism, bowing to spontaneity, tailing behind the masses." (**Resistance**, VII, No. 1)

And the Workers' Congress claims that

"...our movement has not grasped the truth that it is through the right opportunist tendencies of primitiveness, economism, liberalism and all forms of bowing to spontaneity in our midst that the influence of modern revisionism penetrates our ranks." (**The Communist**, Dec. 23, 1976)

Many other groups make the same argument.

The activities of the communist movement do have a largely spontaneous character. Its growth, division of labor, geographical and mass concentration policies, and work in political and economic struggles all mainly develop spontaneously, and not according to any definite plan. But the conclusion that the "Left-Wing" draws from all this--namely, that right opportunism is the main danger--has two basic flaws, the first factual and the second theoretical

If the communist movement has been tailing after the spontaneous trade-unionist sentiment of the working class for the last six or seven years, then it has done a spectacularly unsuccessful job of it. The trade-union reformists and liberals, after all, have a mass movement in their tow. We would expect to find Marxist-Leninist forces who yielded their ideological and political independence before this movement immersed in it. The tailism of the CPUSA, for example, has won it many posts in the trade unions and liberal

Democratic Party organizations. The anti-revisionists should have something to show for pursuing the same policies. But in fact they do not, for the simple reason that they have not been pursuing the same policies. Instead of a communist movement whose identity is submerged within a reformist and liberal-led trade-union movement we find a communist movement still, for the most part, isolated from the organizations and activities of the working class movement. The basic reason for this isolation lies not in tailing after the reformist-led working class movement. Rather this isolation stems from an attempt to lead a new, completely revolutionary mass movement in opposition to the first at a time when the subjective conditions within the advanced sectors of the working class will not support it.

This analysis of the real root of our problems does not contradict our description of communist work as largely spontaneous. Where the "Lefts" see "all forms of bowing to spontaneity" as Right, Marxism-Leninism has always held that both forms of opportunism, "Left" and Right, rest on advocating spontaneity in the revolutionary movement.

Right opportunism bows to the spontaneous trade-unionist ideology and activity of the working class. "Left" opportunism, on the other hand, gives way before the outrage of the ruined petit-bourgeoisie, the intellectuals with no prospects, and the politically inexperienced, revolutionary-minded workers disgusted with trade-unionist reformism and electoral double-talk. The first form of bowing to the spontaneity of the masses leads to pandering to the narrowness of their struggles, the second to racing ahead of the subjective or objective possibilities of the given political moment, to abstentionism and sectarian intransigence. The two tend to converge: the former gets lost somewhere back down the road, while the latter gets lost somewhere far ahead of the line of march, but each leaves the spontaneous mass movement largely to its own devices and, of course, to the reformists who prey upon it.

The re-emergence of the communist movement since 1968 came about largely spontaneously in the middle strata. Taking the path of least resistance has continued and reinforced the spontaneous class character of this movement, and aggravated its weaknesses. In the concrete circumstances of the U.S. communist movement, taking the path of least resistance has meant bowing to the spontaneity of the revolutionary intelligentsia.

Everyone admits that the practical work of the Marxist-Leninists among the working class has very serious shortcomings. The interests and spontaneous class instincts of the radicalized petit-bourgeoisie hamper the swift rectification of these defects. In bowing to the spontaneity of this strata,

petty-bourgeois revolutionism presents the major obstacle to improving the practical work of the Marxist-Leninists. At the present time, a great deal of the activity of many of the larger communist groups is, appearances to the contrary, practically aimed at the petit-bourgeois strata now sympathetic to communism. For example, much of the phrase-mongering about the leading role of Marxist-Leninists, the dictatorship of the proletariat, etc., and much of the activity **around** the workers' movement (strike support, demonstrations, "fightback" actions, "colonization") is far more accessible to and geared towards this strata than it is towards the working class itself. To some degree, this reflects inexperience, amateurishness, and bad styles of work; but to some degree, it reflects giving way before the spontaneity of radicalized students and intellectuals. In other words, there is a point where work "misdone" for the working class becomes work well-done for the revolutionary intelligentsia, and, very secondarily at this time, some young, very revolutionary, but somewhat anarchistic workers.

The drawbacks of our practical work from the perspective of the working class-its inconsistency, its adventurism, its phrase-mongering, revolutionary posturing, arrogance, sectarianism and fantastic self-importance--constitute its very strengths for politically inexperienced sections of the radicalized petit-bourgeoisie. The qualities which fence the "lefts" off from the working class make them attractive for the impatient intelligentsia. Because the communist forces are so isolated from the proletarian masses, they can act in the most sectarian fashion they care to without fear of losing their working class base. At the same time, their impetuosity and extremism will be rewarded by the influx of more petit-bourgeois revolutionists. Should the "Lefts" try to transform their practice in the direction of the working class, though, they will suffer some losses among their present class base. Taking the path of least resistance, then, leads us to submerging the communist presence not in the reformist-led trade-union movement, but rather in the fanaticism of the revolutionary intelligentsia.

The isolated, exclusive character of communist-initiated demonstrations; the rationales put forward for no unity of action with, variously, reformist trade-union leaders, the revisionists, or simply other communist groups judged outside the "genuine" Marxist-Leninists; the elevation of spontaneous economic struggles into great class battles which supposedly prove the broad masses' desire for an even more r-r-revolutionary leadership; the glorification of individualistic armed direct actions by desperate assembly-line or unemployed workers¹ or of the apoliticism and cynicism of the masses; all these and more leave no doubt as to the true nature of most of the bowing to spontaneity taking place today in the communist movement. In making it more difficult to fuse Marxism-Leninism with the workers'

movement, however, the spontaneity of the "Lefts" makes it easier to adapt communism to their semi-anarchist leanings.

Without combating the "Lefts'" tailism of the radicalized intelligentsia and some young workers inclined towards adventurism, the Marxist-Leninists will not succeed in establishing a correct orientation in their practical work. "Left" opportunism sacrifices the interests of the majority of the working class to the subjective interests of a small minority. The path to real communist breakthroughs among the working class demands the uprooting of "left" opportunist influence, particularly "left" sectarianism. For in the final analysis, the continued disunity of the Marxist-Leninists relegates all the groups to a place largely alongside of the spontaneous mass movement--the separate, antagonistic organizations simply lack the strength to divert that movement in a revolutionary direction.

The equation drawn by the "Lefts" between economism and right opportunism is open to similar kinds of objections. The Right has no monopoly on the over-valuation of the economic struggle. At the core of every deviation from Marxism-Leninism, "Left" or Right, lie economist premises. The two-line struggle in the First International from 1869 to 1872 centered on the relationship between political and economic struggle. Marx and Engels fought for the primacy of politics, but the anarchist Bakunin sought to restrict the proletariat to the "essentially economic" struggle. In the hundred-odd years since, every major non-Marxist deviation has mounted an economist assault on Marxist theory; whether the Right economism of Kautsky and Hillquit, or the "Left" economism of Trotsky, Luxembourg and the early Bukharin during the Second International; whether the Right economism of the later Bukharin, of Browder and the modern revisionists or the "Left" economism of Pannekoek and Trotsky during the Comintern and Cominform years.

The ideological sources of Right economism lie in reformism and liberalism; the sources of "Left" economism in anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism. Both exaggerate the importance of the economic struggle, and consider the revolution an essentially spontaneous act brought about by the complete socialization of the productive forces. Though their tactics differ radically, their fundamental assumptions about the role of economic struggle converge. For example, both anarcho-syndicalism and reformist trade-unionism regard the trade unions as the means and ends of working class struggle. This common ground has allowed many anarcho-syndicalist leaders to pass over to the camp of reformism.

In looking at the activity of the U.S. communist movement, we have to distinguish between these two basic forms of economism, despite their

somewhat similar appearances. Tailing the liberals, the Right economists tend to oppose political demands, both democratic and socialist, as too revolutionary. The "Lefts," on the other hand, oppose the fight for political reforms and democracy as not revolutionary enough.² Each seeks to restrict the proletariat to economic battles. The Rights do so because they think the working class is only fit for the economic struggle, while politics is the province of the liberals. The "Lefts" do so because they think the economic struggle is alone fit for the proletariat, since it does not "breed bourgeois-democratic illusions." For "Left" economism, the fight for reforms and democracy is the province of reformists and bourgeois democrats, and the working class should seek at all costs to avoid being sucked into it. The conception of politics of the "Lefts" thus mirrors that of the Rights.

In the U.S. anti-revisionist movement, the main form of economism has historically come from the ultra-left. The social-chauvinist economism of the Progressive Labor Party provides the most glaring example. The PLP attacked the Black liberation struggle, other national movements and the women's movement for their reformism in fighting for democratic demands. In opposition to "redividing the pie," its definition of consistent democracy, PL developed a program to fight for the "whole pie." This program revolved around exclusively economic demands, such as their "30 for 40 with a Big Pay Boost!"

Today the predominant trend in the communist movement continues this "left" economist tradition. The opposition to reforms like the Equal Rights Amendment, busing to achieve partial school desegregation,³ preferential hiring and superseniority, etc., stems from "left" economist premises. We will develop this point in Chapter Four, where we take up "left" opportunism in political line.

Footnotes

¹ See, for example, the analyses in the back-to-back articles on Ashby Leach and Bornson and Davis in the December, 1976 **Revolution**, newspaper of the RCP. Ashby Leach took over a floor of the Chessie corporation headquarters and thirteen hostages, demanding that Chessie stop cheating veterans out of their GI benefits, and reimburse those who had been denied their benefits. Tom Bornson and Lonnie Davis took over a foodstamp office for several hours at knife-point, holding the office supervisor and several office workers hostage. All three men acted out of desperation brought on by the misery caused by capitalism, and judging by the accounts, all three tried to right injustices on behalf of thousands of their class brothers and sisters.

It is one thing to explain their actions, defend them against the bourgeois state, and conduct political exposures around Capital's need for a reserve army of labor, etc. It is another thing to exalt their actions. By comparing their revolutionary violence to that of the mass peasant movements in China, the RCP glorifies this kind of response to oppression and exploitation, and fails to point out the weaknesses in the U.S. working class movement which it represents.

² See especially Lenin's contrast of the "old" and "new" economism (which he called "imperialist economism") in the first three articles of CW 23. There he pays particular attention to the unity of the "Left" and Right features:

"The old Economism of 1894-1902 reasoned thus: the Narodniks have been refuted; capitalism has triumphed in Russia. Consequently, there can be no question of political revolution. The practical conclusion: either "economic struggle be left to the workers and political struggle to the liberals"--that is a curvet to the right--or, instead of political revolution, a general strike for socialist revolution. That curvet to the left was advocated in a pamphlet, now forgotten, of a Russian Economist of the late nineties.

"Now a new Economism is being born. Its reasoning is similarly based on the two curvets: "Right"--we are against the "right to self-determination"... "Left"--we are opposed to a minimum programme (i.e., opposed to struggle for reforms and democracy) as "contradictory" to socialist revolution." (LCW 23, p. 13)

³ For more on the "left" economist opposition to busing, see our pamphlet, **"It's Not the Bus": Busing and the Democratic Struggle in Boston, 1974-75**, particularly pp. 1-5.