

REPORT ON THE "CONFERENCE ON THE INTERNATIONAL SITUATION"

New York City, November 20, 1976

This gathering, subtitled the "Conference on the International Situation, War, Revolution, and the Internationalist Tasks of the American People," was organized by the Maoist Revolutionary Communist Party and its youth affiliate, the Revolutionary Student Brigade. It was the largest Maoist meeting yet held in New York, drawing between 1,100 and 1,500 people as compared to about 900 for the "united front" meetings of two years ago to discuss Maoist regroupment between the RCP, the October League, and the Guardian. Unlike the previous meetings, this one was strictly an RCP affair, boycotted by both OL and the Guardian. Its aim was to establish the RCP's hegemony in the Maoist movement, especially in New York, and to settle a debate in the RCP's ranks and with other Maoist organizations over what China's foreign policy really is.

The size of the conference can be explained by two factors. First, it was advertized widely as a broad, nonsectarian discussion of world affairs. A number of big-name sponsors were secured including nobel prize winners and prominent China scholars. Second, it was built through a full-scale national mobilization of the RCP's membership with large delegations from the Midwest and the West Coast. (Many of the listed sponsors did not attend the conference and three of them publicly withdrew their sponsorship the day before the meeting on the grounds that "It began to have the feeling of a left-sectarian event" [Prof. Richard A. Falk].)

Invited speakers who did attend outside of the RCP included Dave Dellinger, Egbal Ahmed, Dave McReynolds, Prof. Mark Selden, and organizations such as the Iranian Student Association, Indian Peoples Association in North America, and Vietnam Veterans Against the War. The steering committee passed a motion that no Trotskyists would be permitted to speak, but Ralph Schoenman was invited to be on the panel debating China's foreign policy. Evidently the organizers were unaware that his views on this question are essentially similar to those of the SWP.

It was clear that for the RCP the real debate was between themselves and William Hinton. Hinton defended the position -- which is China's actual policy -- that the Soviet Union is the "main danger" and that Maoists should now seek an alliance with American imperialism against the USSR. The RCP position is equal blame to the "two superpowers" and a rejection of support to Washington. The "third" tendency permitted by the organizers were generally unaffiliated radicals who would uphold the view that the U.S. is the main danger, although with the exception of Schoenman most of these were half-Maoists who

held that the Soviet Union was "probably" capitalist. No one openly defending the Moscow line participated.

The format was a three-way, equal time debate, repeated throughout the day on different aspects of the attitude toward the U.S. and USSR. The RCP, whose members were a clear majority of the participants, at the beginning tried to keep its members polite and permit an exchange of views within the narrow framework of positions represented. As the day wore on it became clear that its members weren't used to this and they became more and more hostile to the non-RCP speakers.

In the morning there was a three-way opening debate between Hinton; Nick Unger of the RCP; and Egbal Ahmed, who held that the Soviet Union was capitalist but that the Soviet navy was not a threat to the Third World.

This was followed by two sets of workshops, run consecutively. The largest were on Angola in the morning and on China's foreign policy in the afternoon. I went to both, which were attended by about 400 people each. The audience was almost equally divided in the Angola workshop, with a slight majority for the RCP. The RCP defended the proposition that no support should have been given to any of the three nationalist groups in the civil war, but that the Cubans were "capitalist mercenaries" fronting for the Soviet Union in an attempt to turn Angola into a Soviet colony. They openly stated that Cuba had restored capitalism. Their opponents, mostly Third Worldists and Guardian types, supported the MPLA as "socialist" and backed the Cuban-Soviet intervention. The Spartacist League participated actively, criticizing the characterization of the Soviet Union and Cuba as capitalist. They were loudly abused by the Maoists but usually managed to finish their speeches in the question period.

The China foreign policy panel consisted of Ralph Schoenman, William Hinton again, and Clark Kissinger, former SDS and antiwar activist, who is now a hard-line RCP supporter although he may not be a member. Schoenman presented a revolutionary Marxist criticism of Chinese foreign policy, peaceful coexistence, and the lack of socialist democracy in China. About half way through his speech the audience got the drift of where he was going and the Maoists began to shout abuse and to boo him. He was defended by a significant minority of the audience. At the end he was jeered by about three-quarters of those present but the other 25 percent applauded him loudly. This was clearly more than just the Spartacists and included many independents present and perhaps some RCPers who believed in democratic procedures.

Kissinger began by attacking the "Trots" and justifying the imprisonment of the Chinese Trotskyists. ("Once when speaking on China a fervent young man demanded to know why China had released a large number of Kuomintang war criminals but still kept Trotskyites in jail in China. I replied that I did not know precisely but that the penal policy in China is to work

for ideological reformation of the person and I could only conclude that Kuomintang generals were more liable to this process than Trotskyites.") This was applauded by the Maoists.

Kissinger's basic line was that China's policy of friendship for imperialism and for dictatorships in the colonial world was only a government-to-government policy, but that on a party-to-party level it still promoted revolution.

Hinton disputed Kissinger, but while he presented the actual policy he was a poor debater and failed to cite any documentary proof. The whole debate turned on the "orthodoxy" of what Peking's line was supposed to be and not very much on the merits of the conflicting interpretations and Hinton failed to make a serious case, out of incompetence.

The evening session was another three-way debate, between Hinton, Dave Dellinger, and Bob Avakian. Here the mask was taken off and the session was turned into an RCP victory rally. A standing ovation was organized for Avakian when he appeared on the platform. He shouted insults at the Guardian and the OL and proclaimed the RCP correct against Hinton and that it was the revolutionary party in the United States. He succeeded in whipping up his members and convincing the great majority of them that Hinton did not represent the real line: that it was possible to remain a Maoist and still be anti-imperialist and keep the Peking franchise.

The OL boycotted the conference on the grounds that "revisionists" were permitted to speak. They sent in a few people to participate from the floor in the question periods. One of them demanded to know what position Avakian had on the "Gang of Four." Avakian replied that the RCP was still considering this and had not made up its mind. It appears that despite his demagogy, the RCP has already lost the Peking mandate: Hsinhua has already printed lengthy excerpts from the October League's Call supporting the purge.

(Also in the question period, Avakian defended Stalin's reign of terror in the 1930s as a "great achievement of socialism" and promised that the RCP would know how to deal with "external and internal enemies" in the future.)

This conference clearly establishes the RCP as the largest Maoist organization in the country. Judging from the applause in the evening "rally" some 700 or 800 of those present considered themselves Avakian supporters. Significantly the conference projected no action of any kind and discussed no specific anti-imperialist struggles taking place in the United States today. Its purpose was to convince the membership of the RCP that they could at the same time retain the position of being a general anti-imperialist

organization and still claim the authority of the Chinese state. The generally high spirits of the final meeting indicate that Avakian succeeded in this purpose for the time being.

Nevertheless, such a "victory" is plainly an ephemeral one. It rests on a deliberate "misunderstanding" of Peking's line that is certain to be revealed to even the least conscious RCP'er in the period ahead. The fact that the RCP felt the need to permit the kind of debate that did take place at the conference shows that this is an issue of crisis proportions for them and that the crisis will be renewed and deepened not far down the road.

Most of the participants were young. Talking to a few of them I got the impression that many of them are in the RCP for largely accidental reasons. The leadership and the basic cadres are hard Stalinists of the most unregenerate type who are completely cynical about workers' democracy and are openly against it. Even their commitment to "anti-imperialism" seems tactical, based on the realization that it is impossible to build anything in this country on the Hinton-Peking line. (Hinton advocated a campaign to pressure the Pentagon to send more arms to Japan and NATO and a campaign to oppose trade with the Soviet Union.) Many of the young RCP'ers and members of the RSB genuinely believe that there is socialist democracy in China and that is why they are Maoists. They are ignorant of Soviet history and accept what they are told about Stalin and Trotskyism, but they are genuinely repelled by the Soviet Union. (They accept without question that the Soviet Union is "capitalist," an assumption that underlies the whole current line of all the Maoist groups.)

(Even the OL is afraid to go the whole route with Peking and Hinton. Their official position is that the Soviet Union is the "main danger" and that they should wage a propaganda offensive against the USSR and the CP as "capitalists," but they stop short of an open bloc with Washington.)

If we can participate in the debate that is taking place and point out to some of the young RSB'ers the difference between what their leadership tells them Peking stands for and what it really stands for we may have an effect in preventing the RCP from consolidating its hold on a number of young radicals who have joined it for reasons quite different from the policies it really represents.

Les Evans
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