

Proletarian Unity League

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

### **Chapter 4: "Left" Opportunism in Political Line**

#### **D. "Left" Opportunism towards Reformist Organizations, the Tactics of the United Front, and the Mass Line**

From a "left" opportunist conception of the reform struggle flows a whole series of "left" policies towards reformist organizations, united front tactics, and the mass struggle. If most reforms really do scuttle the revolutionary movement, then reformist organizations like trade unions represent one big, never-ending quagmire for revolutionaries. So in place of "get out of the trade unions," the "Left" slogan criticized by Lenin, we hear "jam the unions" from the RU/RCP. If reforms always lull the masses to sleep, then communists should do everything possible to keep the masses out of earshot of reformist leaders. If they can't prevent that, the least they can do is not be present. We witness, therefore, a revival of the kind of "united front from below" tactics made famous by the Progressive Labor Party. Some groups say that we can only enter united fronts from above "from strength"; others tell us it is "impermissible" to appear on the same platform with reformists or revisionists. The comforting merits of abstentionism and boycotts have been rediscovered: shouts ring out to boycott rallies called by bourgeois reformists, to boycott demonstrations in which revisionists participate, and to boycott bourgeois busing plans. Most striking of all is the frequency of the "correct demonstration" tactic (otherwise known as "small but spirited") in which a single communist group or narrow circle of them ignore every problem of involving the masses in real action and instead hold spiritually pure revival meetings to worship their own sloganeering.

As the most basic organizations of the working class, the trade unions provide a good test of tactical line. With few exceptions, "left" opportunism has dominated the work of the communist movement within the trade unions during the past several years. In the work of the RU/RCP and the OL it has produced significant results, deepening rather than narrowing the gap between the communist and workers' movements.

Many comrades will take exception to characterizing the RU/RCP's trade union work as "left". They will point to the undeniable economism of the RU/RCP's practice within the trade unions; they will emphasize the failure to educate advanced workers to communism, to raise political issues, or to do

political exposures. We recognize all this and agree with it, from our own experience. But as the discussion in Chapter Two of economism and bowing to spontaneity showed, the aspects mentioned do not constitute a line; they are consequences of one. The question remains: what line produces these results, and from what "direction" does it come?

The RU/RCP proposes the creation of "anti-imperialist workers organizations" (similar in some respects to the "mass revolutionary workers organizations" of the Sojourner Truth Organization). While the RU/RCP has never spelled out the exact relationship of these organizations to the unions, in fact they act as **substitutes for political work within the unions**. In other words, they do not supplant the unions per se; they simply drain off (or attempt to) the most militant, politically conscious workers, who are encouraged to build these organizations as the "method" to a revolutionary workers' movement. (This essentially dual-unionist method has also characterized the OL's National Fightback Organization.) In strike situations, the RU/RCP tries to set up "Strike Support Committees," packed with its own adherents, who act in opposition to the union leadership. This opposition has as its goal not discrediting before the masses the labor aristocracy's traitorous policies, nor driving them out of the trade union movement. Rather it is aimed at channeling the most advanced workers into the "intermediate workers organizations," and the abandonment of political work within the unions. This fundamentally anarcho-syndicalist view produces a characteristic division of labor remarked on by all observers: business unionism for the business unions (or, trade-unionism for the trade-unionists); anti-imperialism for the "anti-imperialist workers organizations"; and communism for the communists.

In our opinion, this characterization of the RU/RCP trade union work can be proved even by reference to those valuable summaries of experience authored by comrades who believe the RU/RCP practices reformism. For example, we refer the reader to the summaries of the Dasco strike by the August Twenty-Ninth Movement (M-L) and the Jung Sai strike by I Wor Kuen. What emerges from these accounts is not "their descendance to the role of militant trade-unionists." (I Wor Kuen **Journal** No. 3, p. 36) In these strikes and others, the RU/RCP has not acted like militant trade-unionists. They have acted like "left-wing" fanatics, completely mistaking their own subjective impatience with the pace of the class struggle for the current state of class consciousness, substituting the actions of revolutionaries for those of the masses, concocting "all embracing projects" and promoting "ideal" forms of organization (the strike support committees, the intermediate workers organizations) in place of patient work within the trade unions, and urging militancy and more militancy past the point where a halt or even a tactical retreat becomes necessary.

The RU/RCP does not fail to do consistent communist propaganda among the politically conscious workers because it concentrates its forces on securing reforms and immediate benefits. On the contrary, both strikes summarized by the comrades of ATM and IWK were lost from every conceivable trade unionist or reform perspective, and the RU/RCP's line and actions contributed significantly to these failures. Rather, the RU/RCP attempts through their own "militancy" to unleash the "evil passions" of the masses of which anarchists like Bakunin spoke so often. That this "militancy" concerns almost exclusively economic struggle, neglecting the ideological and political realm, only strengthens the anarcho-syndicalist characterization:

"In its basic aspects, Syndicalism, or more properly Anarcho-Syndicalism, may be defined very briefly as that tendency in the labor movement to confine the revolutionary class struggle of the workers to the economic field, to practically ignore the state, and to reduce the whole fight of the working class to simply a question of trade union action. Its fighting organization is the trade union [or, "anti-imperialist workers organization," organ of the "revolutionary workers' movement"--ed. note]; its basic method of class warfare is the strike, with the general strike as the revolutionary weapon; and its revolutionary goal is the setting up of a trade union "state" to conduct industry and all other social activities." (W.Z. Foster, **The Communist**, November 1935)

Note especially some of the errors Foster attributes to syndicalism:

"(1) failure to provide the closely-knit organization of the most developed revolutionary elements (which must be the Communist Party) indispensable for uniting and leading the less developed masses; [ed. note: party-building]

"(2) failure to utilize the many political methods of struggle vitally necessary to carry on the workers' daily fight against the state and the capitalists for the eventual overthrow of capitalism, and for the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat;

"(3) failure to establish a basis for the unity of the workers with the poorer sections of the farmers and petty bourgeoisie against the capitalists, a unity fundamental for effective struggle against capitalism;

"(4) failure to work out a practical plan for the operation of the workers' society after the abolition of capitalism.

"Thus, briefly, by preventing the revolutionary political organization of the workers, by hindering their developing political struggle, by alienating their natural class allies, and by confusing them regarding the future order of

society, Syndicalism demobilizes the workers politically before the attacks of the capitalist state, and it leads inevitably to the defeat of the working class in its revolutionary struggle." (**Ibid.**)

A "left" line on trade union work has also overtaken the OL in the last few years. Though their practice even then tended towards adventurism, the OL's former line had some correct and some Rightist features. In words, the OL continues to stress correctly the necessity to work diligently within the trade unions, winning the workers away from the white chauvinist, imperialist, male supremacist, and generally class collaborationist policies of the "picket captains for capitalism." But in deeds the OL has shifted political work outside the trade unions towards their "Fightback" organizations.<sup>1</sup>

This move reflects their adventurism and has sectarian motivations as well. The Fightback Organizations were intended to show that the OL had a "mass base" and could therefore form a party. The OL's work in the trade unions could not support such a pretense. Consequently, the OL increasingly aims at maneuvering to win endorsements from union locals or caucuses for their various conferences and demonstrations, in the vain hope that they will somehow manage to "patent" the "Fightback" before Gus Hall or the SWP do so.

### **The "Theory of the Offensive"**

Popular attitudes towards united front tactics and the masses in general display undeniable anarchist tendencies. Of course, "left oppositionist" tactics within the trade unions and other mass organizations limit the possibilities of even forming temporary united fronts with reformist leaders. But some comrades are happy to go further and declare "in principle" the impermissibility of all sorts of compromises and tactical alliances with opportunists. The collection of petit-bourgeois prejudices, abstentionist tactics and self-serving bravado which guide so much communist practice towards the masses amount to a practical forswearing of united front tactics. Nothing could be more dangerous to the fusing of Marxism-Leninism with the workers' movement.

The uneven development of political consciousness in class society, the relatively small numbers of conscious revolutionaries, the existence of classes and strata intermediate between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the relative inexperience of the masses, their lack of effective organization, and their infection by various petit-bourgeois prejudices all dictate united front policies. Therefore, myriad tactical alliances with reformists and even the rankest opportunists are necessary to speak to the masses under their influence, to expose their policies, to educate the masses through the

masses' own experience, and eventually to drive the opportunists out of the mass movements.

At the root of the refusal to practice united front tactics lies the frenzy of the petit-bourgeois, and to a lesser extent at this time, the spontaneous rebellion of young, militant workers. Ultra-leftists project onto the masses their own impetuosity, their own unwillingness to compromise, to gather forces and to choose the opportune moment for attack. A favorite image for our "left" communists is Mao Tse-tung's description of the peasants in China around 1930 as a parched prairie, liable to quick combustion. Contrary to some comrades' belief, Mao was not simply expressing the general truth that "the people want revolution." Mao arrived at this image following intensive investigation of the peasant movement, a movement marked by spontaneous **armed uprisings, armed occupations** of landlord estates, and spontaneous executions **on a mass scale** of landlords, tax collectors, and the "evil gentry." But our "leftists" have taken this image as a "general recipe" for revolutionary work, with predictable results. The implication is that our revolution lacks not a Communist Party, not a mass revolutionary movement, but merely the "single spark" which will set off the general conflagration. The RU/RCP has even elaborated something it grandiosely terms "the single-spark method" which "theorizes" their own impatience for "action." Following this method, a handful of RU and RSB members have seized the Statue of Liberty and presumably waited for the prairie fire to alight; chained themselves inside of Boston's Faneuil Hall, and waited; sung anti-Nixon Christmas carols on the streets of New York, and waited; thrown white paint on Boston School Committeeman John Kerrigan, and waited...

With their tactical lines, "left" communists define the task of revolutionaries not as the organization and leadership of a revolution made by the masses, but simply as the triggering of the "offensive." This attitude towards the united front finds a convenient rationale in the "left" taste for the "general principle." For example, some groups delight in setting all sorts of r-r-revolutionary conditions for participating in a united front with reformist leaders, or even for taking advantage of contradictions among the enemy. The Workers Viewpoint Organization writes:

"Are there differences between the monopoly groups? Of course there are. This is inherent by the very nature of capitalism...And to utilize these contradictions, we must first have **initiative** in the struggle, on our own grounds, to propagate proletarian democracy." (Vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 5-6)

And PRRWO insists, "The united front from above must come from a position of strength." (**Palante**, no. 11, p. 9) These are fine words: we must have initiative, we must deal from strength, we must stay on our own grounds,

we must this and we must that. But the demands of the class struggle have a way of ignoring fine words. The problem is, we don't have those things, and we would like to get them. Of course we must retain the freedom to criticize and we attempt to set what other conditions we can in concluding a tactical alliance. In every case we do so in the belief that the alliance will aid us in organizing the revolutionary proletariat. But today the bourgeoisie and its agents have the initiative in the class struggle; today they usually choose the grounds for each new battle; today the forces of reaction are strong and those of revolution weak. Because we fight for the initiative, we conclude many tactical alliances in which the bourgeoisie or its agents still have it. Because we fight for a position of strength we conclude many tactical alliances in which the bourgeoisie or its agents still retain the advantage. If we choose our tactical alliances well, adopting a flexible line, setting appropriate conditions, and always maintaining our own independence and initiative, these alliances will enable the revolutionary proletariat to gain the upper hand, and bring us our position of strength. But if we refuse all compromise and every tactical zigzag, whining that we do not have strength or initiative, or are not on our home grounds, we merely justify our own passivity and condemn ourselves to a splendid isolation.

Finally, we are told we must not make tactical alliances or compromises with the reformists and rank opportunists, you see, because we are on the **offensive**.

"The dialectics of the proletarian class struggle today are such that any hesitancy or wavering in taking the offensive, any call to adopt a defensive strategy, amounts to bringing about fascism rather than proletarian revolution and socialism. For that reason, communists must adopt an offensive strategy on all fronts, combined with communist leadership in all those fronts." (**WV**, Vol. 1, no. 2, p. 12)

As is their custom, WVO offers no evidence to support this particular "viewpoint. The concept of strategy at work here remains a mystery. If WVO means the overall strategy for proletarian revolution, then they are cursing a strawman. The United Front Against Fascism, against which WVO is polemicizing in the above quotation, is not a strategy in this sense, but a "tactical orientation" as Dimitrov makes abundantly clear. On the other hand, if the WVO uses strategy differently in the above passage, by way of analogy to military strategy, say, then they have some explaining to do. Mao of course writes of the "strategic defensive" in the Second Revolutionary Civil War, and even of the "strategic retreat," but the advocacy of either the strategic defensive or the strategic counter-offensive in this sense demands some hard thinking which our "leftists" haven't done. Militant exhortation to the "offensive" without any concrete analysis amounts to nothing more than

a refurbished version of the "theory of the offensive" which "Left" Communists attempted to make the basis of the Comintern's **tactics**. Lenin did not dispute "whether a revolutionary offensive is permissible in general," and in this context he described such a theory as "not at all false." (**LCW 32**, pp. 472-73) But the necessity of a revolutionary offensive in general and the tactical application of the "offensive on all fronts" are two entirely different questions.

In the absence of the necessary concrete analysis, "leftists" can offer only the brilliant general principle. In criticizing its WVO comrades of the "genuine wing" for adopting too defensive an outlook (!!!), PRRWO says,

"We do not rule out [!!!] defensive tactics such as the United Front from above (i.e., tactical alliances with reformist leaders] even (!!!) in this period, but we must be clear that we are on the offensive because revolution is the main trend in the world today, and our organizing must reflect this."  
(**Palante**, vol. 6, no. 1, p. 2)

This is the laziness which Mao associates with all dogmatists: unwillingness to work hard to solve real problems, and instead resorting to rhetorical phrases which cover up real confusion. Revolution may be the main trend in the world for the next fifty years, just as we have lived on the eve of proletarian revolution for the last seventy-five, but main trends have yet to make a revolution. Rather than star-gazing at the world's main trend in reverential awe, we would do better to study the conditions of our own struggle.

Since the main trend is to revolution, and since, you understand, we must have the offensive initiative on our own grounds at all times on all fronts, certain extraordinary measures are called for. The masses are not on the offensive; yet we must be on the offensive. Therefore, let us go ahead without them, surely they'll catch up. In the meantime, we will substitute the actions of revolutionaries for those of the masses. So runs the logic of "left" impetuosity. This logic recognizes no necessity to help organize the masses; it merely seeks to provide the catalytic agent which will unleash them.

As one might guess, the interests of this "offensive" and groupist interests coincide. At the root of both lie subjectivism; consequently, each have sectarianism as a natural outgrowth. "Left" sectarians refuse to cooperate with other groups, and therefore prevent any substantial mobilization of the masses from taking place. Or else they establish unacceptable conditions for joint participation, in which their own group sets all the terms. In either case they break with the masses by breaking with other groups, since it is

impossible to exclude other groups effectively and on unprincipled grounds without creating an atmosphere which the masses find oppressive. On the other hand, "left" subjectivist notions of the "offensive" or the "prairie fire" or estimates that "working and oppressed people are pressing forward spontaneously toward socialism and revolution with greater and greater energy and desire for struggle," (**The Communist**, supplement to no. 10, p. 8) feed "left" sectarianism. If no need exists to organize the masses, if we lack only a means to "ignite" them, then the struggle to build a strong Marxist-Leninist Communist Party has little urgency. We ourselves, our little "correct trend," can do the trick.

Most demonstrations called by the communist movement bear eloquent testimony to the results of these policies. One of the pet phrases of our "Lefts" (right up there with the proverbial "honest elements") describes them best: "small but spirited." And indeed, the proportions vary in indirect relationship with one another: the more subjectivist about the communist and workers' movements, the more isolated from both; the more isolated from both, the more subjectivist about both. Which leads to "tiny but militant," and "hardly anybody at all but wildly enthusiastic." For petit-bourgeois militants given to fits of exaltation and despair, these tactics have a purpose. They promise that it will not take much work or patience before these militants can ride the crest of the masses' upsurge clear to state power. But for the communist movement, they offer defeat and irrelevance.

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#### Footnote

<sup>1</sup> With the National Fightback Organization going the way of the "city-wide labor solidarity organizations," the "anti-repression coalitions" and the various other shortlived OL-initiated "mass" organizations, a shift back towards the trade unions may apparently be in the works. From the many criticisms of the NFBO, the OL will probably take a superficial understanding of their "dual-unionist" errors and a general characterization of the work as Right. In the first instance, they will seek to correct these "Right" errors by adopting an even more "super-revolutionary" stance in the trade unions, as their recent calls for a "boycott" of the Sadlowski campaign indicate. After forming their ultra-left party, they will probably reverse direction, moving Rightwards towards more united front activity, in an effort to crawl back from their extreme isolation in the revolutionary and workers' movements.