

To all members for discussion at the Conference on 20th April 1980.

Draft Internal Statement on the History of the RCLB

The Communist Party of Great Britain was founded on 1st August 1920 as the revolutionary vanguard of the working class in Britain. It was formed through the unity of the most systematic Marxist elements and the most resolute fighters in the working class struggle, with the active encouragement of the Third International.

Elements of rightist revisionism however were apparent in the party from the beginning, and after the Second World War finally gained the upper hand. By the time of the great international struggle against modern revisionism in the early 60's, the CPGB had become a party irretrievably in the hands of a revisionist clique, a party of reformist politics betraying the working class more effectively than the open representatives of the bourgeoisie could do. It is out of the historical struggle to rebuild the vanguard party of the working class that the Revolutionary Communist League was formed.

The anti-revisionist movement in Britain in the middle sixties was weakened by the continuation of certain features of revisionism among its comrades, and also by some anarchistic tendencies influenced by negative features of the Cultural Revolution. These both had their social roots in the class nature of imperialist Britain. The untimely death of Comrade Michael McCreery was also a serious handicap.

In the later 60's two progressive party-building trends existed. One, to which many honest comrades rallied in the belief that it could form a genuine revolutionary party, was around the Communist Party of Britain Marxist-Leninist, despite the opportunist weaknesses of its leader Reg Birch. The other trend consisted of a significant number of small anti-revisionist groups strongly committed to mass struggle in their local areas.

The Formation and Development of the C.F.B.M.L.

In April 1967 a number of these local groups united in an extremely loose organization called the "Joint Committee of Communists". In September 1969 the JCC formed the Communist Federation of Britain Marxist-Leninist, in a step which expressed the desire of many comrades to move forward in rebuilding the Communist Party. The new organization continued the mass work of the JCC and made some progress in centralization by establishing a Federation Committee and a permanent elected Chairman and Secretary. It produced a monthly paper, "Struggle", and later a theoretical journal, "Marxist-Leninist Quarterly", which appeared irregularly.

Nevertheless the groups were fundamentally still autonomous. As an organization the CFB was not democratic-centralist, and conducted its business in an extremely ultra-democratic manner. By 1974 the CFB was in severe crisis. In July of that year "Struggle" stopped publication after 56 issues. Later that year a majority was won for the seriously opportunist decision to call on workers to vote Labour in the October 1974 elections. This decision was the subject of bitter criticism and the CFB was facing disintegration.

A sharp struggle about the way ahead in party building produced a line that the federation should be united by an ideological campaign of criticism and self-criticism directed against a number of major errors. This campaign, from March 1975 to February 1976 fundamentally united five out of the seven groups of the CFB and provided the conditions in the summer of 1976 for these groups to abolish group autonomy and formally designate the CFB as a democratic-centralist organization.

Criticism of liberalism overcame a lot of diffuseness and enabled comrades to unite by thrashing out the substance of the differences between them. Criticism of small group mentality won the conviction of comrades that their first duty was to the working class, not to their own circle. Criticism of ultra-democracy overcame aversion to the idea of leadership, and made progress against the lack of division of labour characteristic of the circle stage of party-building. Criticism of empiricism combated a tendency to undertake work without having definite policies and methods of work to guide it. Criticism of intellectualism was directed against

individualist and idealist vacillation characteristic of the intelligentsia, and stressed the working class nature of all Communist work. Negatively, this campaign overstressed ideological questions relative to political and organizational ones, and it laid the basis for dogmatism and one sidedness in the future, for example in integrating theory and practice and in practising democratic-centralism. However in the main it must be affirmed as strongly positive at the time.

A monthly political paper was republished under the new title, "Class Struggle", and the theoretical journal was renamed "Revolution". On political questions, the organization took a more correct position on the Labour Party and on nationalization and started studying the theory of the three worlds. It committed itself to putting the ~~exclusive~~ ^{exclusive} emphasis in mass work on building bases in the industrial working class with the aim of establishing factory cells. By the beginning of 1977 the CFB started to draft a major political document as a step forward towards the programme of the future party. Also between 1976 and 1977 a successful struggle for unity was carried out between the CFB and the Communist Unity Association (Marxist-Leninist). In May 1977, the CFB issued a call to the ML movement to wage a struggle against small group mentality in order to unite to reform a revolutionary Communist party.

The Communist Unity Association Marxist-Leninist

Members of the London and Grimsby groups of the CFB who had split from it in 1971 in protest at the lack of progress in establishing a democratic-centralist organization had formed the Communist Unity Organization. This later united with members of the Revolutionary Marxist Leninist League to form the Communist Unity Association.

The CUA was committed to both Party building and mass work. In general its political stand combined adherence to the fundamental principles of Marxism-Leninism with an objective assessment of the actual situation better than any other Marxist-Leninist group in the early 70's.

Inevitably the character of the Revolutionary Communist League was more influenced by the character and history of the larger organization, the CFB. Nevertheless the CUA contributed substantially to the process of forming the Manifesto of the RCL, particularly in the emphasis on the imperialist nature of Britain and the need to combat opportunism.

The Revolutionary Communist League of Britain

The founding Congress of the Revolutionary Communist League on 23rd July 1977 was a major development in rebuilding the party of the working class. It was a victory in uniting two Marxist-Leninist organizations after years of disunity in the Marxist-Leninist movement. This consolidated the successes in uniting the CFB. Together with the CFB, the CUA and the members of the East London Marxist-Leninist Association, who were to join the League later in 1977, the RCL represented a unity trend that between 1975 and the end of 1977 had united the best elements from seven Marxist-Leninist groups. The Founding Congress was therefore a ~~decisive~~ blow against the small group stage of development in Party building. In addition the Manifesto of the RCL at the time it was written, was the strongest, most systematic contribution in Britain towards the Programme of the future Marxist-Leninist Party. The importance of the Founding Congress was made greater by the fact that the CPBML had by that time irretrievably degenerated into revisionism under the control of the Birch clique, as the comrades of the CWM had exposed.

Morale was high immediately after the founding of the RCLB. In the twelve months following the Founding Congress, membership increased 33% ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~League~~ ^{League}. The League had branches in 7 towns and cities, gaining one in Birmingham, and laying the basis for a other in Manchester. Comrades struggled to build political bases in the industrial working class. The Zimbabwe campaign of 1978 (showed the high level of unity and dedication of comrades.) International relations broadened and deepened on a principled basis with Marxist-Leninist organizations in many countries and a successful delegation to China at the invitation of the C.P.C. laid the foundation for future relations.

Important as all these advances were, there were also inevitably shortcomings in the League which became more apparent and can be seen more clearly with hindsight.

On the relationship between Party-building and mass work, the League had been established in July 1977 after a lot of emphasis on ideological and political questions but having only weak links with mass work. This was partly due to its uneven development and partly to a dogmatic and idealist attitude to Party building. There was also a dogmatic attitude to the correct principle of putting the main emphasis in mass work on mass work among the ^{industrial} working class, which in effect vetoed any other form of mass work.

Distortions in the League's practice of democratic-centralism, which over-emphasized centralism to the relative neglect of democracy, were also an important underlying weakness. In particular the policy of the Standing Committee speaking at Central Committee meetings with a united face was a serious error of over-centralism. Fuller investigation and debate have made it clear that while the CFB was overwhelmingly correct to commit itself to the principles of democratic-centralism, there were mechanical weaknesses in the way a system of leadership was set up which did not grasp that relations of leadership with the membership must grow and be strengthened over a period of time. This, coupled with a strong emphasis on voluntary discipline and with tendencies to dogmatism, created a highly centralized organization too vulnerable to the degeneration of a few people in the leading core and too weak ^{in proletarian democracy and} in comrades using their initiative and finding their bearings independently. An idealist over-emphasis on criticism and self-criticism had also led to some perfectionism which ^{caused rigidity} penalized initiative and damaged the process of integrating theory with practice.

On political line, in the course of putting the emphasis on grasping the main features of the theory of the three worlds, the League made some rightist errors in not giving enough attention in propaganda and practice to exposing British imperialism's international oppression and exploitation.

These contradictions emerged most sharply in the events which led to the formation of an anti-League faction in the leadership of the RCL during 1978. Although it consisted of only three individuals it was quite disruptive to the work of the Central Committee and the Political Committee for much of that year. This was because it paralyzed the process of continually summing up collective work. Most of the comrades lost as a result of the anti-League faction (some 20% of the membership altogether) were lost more as a result of this than as a result of the faction's splittist lies. The Central Committee had never really worked as the leading body of the organization, in particular because of the united face of the standing committee, and the Central Committee was inexperienced in handling serious individualism and splittism among leading comrades.

The faction also created confusion by offering opportunist solutions to some of the weaknesses already referred to. For example they labelled the weaknesses in mass work and initiative as rightism and conservatism. Redfern, the leading figure, claimed to offer a solution by pushing the phrase "Practice is primary" as a slogan. That practice is primary is a very important principle in the relationship between theory and practice, but by pushing it as a slogan in an ultra-left impetuous way, he did nothing to strengthen to style of integrating theory with practice. Instead it tended to imply that comrades should not make sure they understood the policy or line that should guide the work. This also favoured Redfern's attempts to introduce left-opportunist lines without proper consideration.

On political line, instead of correcting the weaknesses on British imperialism accurately and systematically, Redfern used them to attempt to swing the organization into an ultra-left line on the international situation which in effect opposed the theory of the three worlds.

On democratic centralism, Redfern at first took full advantage of the over-centralist errors of the RCL and intensified them. Later as his opportunism came in for greater and greater criticism, he demagogically claimed to be calling for greater democracy, although in fact he was interested only in democracy for himself.

The individuals concerned in the faction were not originally opportunists, and each had a fairly long history of work within a Marxist-Leninist organization. The central figure, N. Redfern, had been appointed Acting Secretary of the

Central Committee in October 1977 and Secretary in January 1978. Although in the past he had had some individualist, dogmatist and commandist tendencies and a tendency to ultra-leftist political positions, these had not in general been antagonistic. However, in the first half of 1978 his individualism took the form of greater arrogance ^{and} a pompous self importance, and contradictions on the Political Committee became antagonistic. This was associated with his marriage to someone from a larger and more experienced Marxist-Leninist organization in another country. The attitude of Redfern and his wife to inner party struggles became careerist. In due course this degenerated into unrestrained splittism, and when the Central Committee imposed disciplinary measures against this splittism, to open defiance of its authority. The case of P.D. was somewhat different. He was not a careerist but he was liberal with Redfern's errors and he had some sympathy with his political line and some tendencies towards dogmatism on major questions. When the contradictions became very sharp, PD suddenly reverted to an ultra-left line opposing the theory of the three worlds, and joined Redfern in defying the Central Committee's disciplinary measures against Redfern's splittism. The three individuals then formed an openly-declared faction. When they circulated a splittist appeal to all members of the organization against the authority of the Central Committee, they were expelled.

The petty bourgeois individualist and splittist conduct of the members of the faction was thoroughly repudiated at a conference in March 1979 at which the great majority of members militantly affirmed their determination to build the League as a fighting vanguard Communist organization.

Rectification Stage

Subsequently, the League undertook a rectification stage that lasted over a year, directed mainly at errors of the centre and aimed at rejecting not only the incorrect lines associated with the faction but also learning deeper lessons to strengthen the organization. Although there were weaknesses in the presentation of this movement due in part to inexperience of leadership as well as some other errors, we have made advances in our understanding of a number of questions important for party building.

Collective study of Mao Zedong's, "On Practice" provided the theoretical basis for correcting idealism of a dogmatist kind while also guarding against empiricism.

The criticism of the "Bolshevization" campaign of 1978 helped correct a mechanical and idealist view of the structure of a Bolshevik organization, while maintaining the fundamental value of cells as basic units of the League where they could be set up.

In May 1978 the Central Committee unanimously passed some amendments to the Manifesto correcting, among other things, certain rightist errors of political line that the faction had obstructed from correcting by their splittism.

A document on Zaire fundamentally corrected some serious ultra-left distortions of our international line that the faction had imposed on the League and which had caused confusion for some time.

The Central Committee approved a major lead stressing the importance of the mass line as a crucial style of work, and rejecting ultra-left criticisms of this fundamental principle.

A discussion document on criticism and self-criticism attempted to strengthen our ability to use this principle too in a more materialist way and to integrate it with a fundamentally healthy democratic-centralist inner party life.

Extensive discussion of our system of democratic centralism helped illuminate some of its weaknesses. Accordingly various measures have now been agreed to promote the practice of Communist democracy and the democratic style of seeking truth from facts, and to inter-relate democracy and centralism better with the complementary policies of centralism based on democracy and democracy under centralized guidance.

The Central Committee issued a major lead correcting ^{the} dogmatic distortion in our mass work which had gone beyond the correct policy of emphasizing industrial

work to a seriously sectarian policy of effectively vetoing any other form of mass work. This had been a major feature which led to the RCL being founded without any deep links with mass work.

In the wake of this important reappraisal, the Central Committee resolved to take up anti-racist and anti-fascist work as a second national priority in mass work. On the basis of this, already some noticeable progress has been made in building links with advanced elements of the national minority communities, a section of the people who will undoubtedly play an extremely important role both in Party building and in the revolutionary struggle as a whole.

Also as a result of following a more dialectical policy on mass work which can unite with broader elements of the working class and with progressive elements from the middle strata, we have been able to play an important part, together with other comrades, in forming the Britain Kampuchea Support Campaign, on one of the most important and heroic struggles against Soviet and regional hegemonism in the world today.

On Ireland the Central Committee corrected a rightist error of an essentially social chauvinist nature, which had failed to put the struggle against British imperialism in northern Ireland firmly in the context of the struggle of the Irish people as a whole. At the same time it corrected a dogmatist error which committed us to applying the principle of a single party for a single state rigidly to northern Ireland. In the wake of this we have become much clearer about how we should present material on the Irish struggle in Britain overwhelmingly from the point of view of opposing British imperialism, rather than particularly stressing any petty bourgeois weaknesses in the nationalist movement in a way that would damage the main thrust of the material. As a result of this important self-critical assessment, as well as of the revised more flexible orientation on mass work, we have given greater practical support to the movement against British imperialism's national oppression of the Irish people.

The reassessment of the important Zimbabwe campaign was delayed by a weakness present in other parts of the rectification campaign as well, which led to presenting ideological questions too much on their own and too separate from political questions. We reaffirm the importance of giving special support to those struggling against the agents of British imperialism in southern Africa, while not falling into a leftist deviation on the international situation in the way the anti-League faction tried to make us. At the same time, future work of this type should follow the mass line better in the way it is organized.

On the particular question of finance, we have decided to maintain the excellent commitment of our dues policy while trying to eliminate the ultra-left excesses which damaged comrades' morale and carried dangers of separating us too much from the customs of the masses in a sectarian way.

Certain questions will need to be looked at more fully in the course of party building work. Although the RCL has carried out a very substantial and positive reappraisal in only just over twelve months, the fact that this is not complete in all its aspects is not surprising. It has become clear that while there have been important lessons to sup up in our own work, in many cases there have also been links with a far bigger reassessment unfolding in the international Communist movement to correct ultra-left and idealist distortions of Marxism-Leninism associated with Lin Biao and the gang of four. While there have been some rightist errors by individual comrades and in individual units of the League, as well as in certain policies of the League itself, in the main facts have shown that the most widespread problem has been a certain ultra-left and idealist trend of thinking which has manifested itself in many ways. The call of the Central Committee to pay particular attention to ultra-left idealism has therefore been justified as essential for correcting a fundamental distortion in how we guarded against both left and right errors. Strong as the advances made in the CFB and CUA were, it is clear that our vigilance was relatively weak against ultra-leftism, and that this was the negative side for example of the valuable work done in the CFB in criticising rightist errors.

Negatively it must be said that at times the rectification campaign was presented as if the main aim was to criticise ultra-leftism for its own sake in an abstract way rather than that the main aim was to strengthen party building.

Undoubtedly this made it more difficult for comrades to see the generally correct orientation. The Central Committee therefore considers that while it was correct to particularly criticise "left" opportunism, this was done in a way that separated ideology too much from other questions. The general theme of criticising ultra-left idealism should have been made more immediately relevant and more concrete to comrades by using more specific terms illustrating different forms of ultra-left idealism, such as dogmatism, impetuosity, rigidity, and sectarianism. Political questions should have been dealt with earlier and not separated from ideological questions. In particular, political amendments to the Manifesto should not have been delayed in their circulation and comrades should have been called on to discuss them, and criticism of the political line of the Zimbabwe campaign and the article in Revolution 3.2 should have been brought forward much earlier. In addition, while it was certainly correct to criticise the anti-League faction sharply after the split, it was incorrect to attempt to target them throughout the rectification stage. The centre must be self-critical about the questions that have not been resolved in the rectification stage and we must determine to resolve them over a period of time in the course of party building and mass work. Unity with the CWM will lay a good basis for this.

Nevertheless despite the shortcomings, enough work has now been done to show the potential importance of the reassessments made during the rectification stage. They are not magic answers, and in most cases they need still to be translated into action and tested in practice. Nevertheless there is every reason to believe they will help us to build the Party more effectively and in a way that unites with more people quite significantly. It is very important that we are determined to translate the lessons of the rectification campaign into practice.

Unity and Progress

The most important achievement of the period that has been won while the rectification stage was going on within the RCL, has been winning unity with the Communist Workers' Movement. While our fraternal discussions with comrades from the CWM played a valuable part in helping to understand which areas of RCL work needed strengthening, at the same time the progress we have made in overcoming certain weaknesses of dogmatism, perfectionism and sectarianism have helped promote unity. Although undoubtedly we have helped our comrades from the CWM to understand some questions, it is important to recognise that the process of unification has been mutual.

The RCL now faces a new stage with its unity with the CWM. We are determined to carry forward mutual support and mutual learning in our united revolutionary work. The new situation in which there will be a single united national Marxist-Leninist organization presents new opportunities for Party-building and mass work at a time of sharpening contradictions in Britain and the world. The more cunning attacks of capitalism engineered by the previous Labour government have now been replaced by the brazen attacks of capitalism orchestrated by the new Conservative government. China is on the march to a modern socialist state and the Kremlin is on the road to war. The Marxist-Leninist movement has gone through testing struggles against new forms of revisionism. Now it is consolidating itself as a vanguard revolutionary force by seeking truth from facts and integrating theory with practice. Together with our comrades from the CWM, we are determined to seize the challenges and opportunities in the new situation in a united way, and make further substantial progress in re-establishing a revolutionary Communist Party in Britain closely linked with the struggles of the masses.

Draft amended after one round of discussion on the SC. For comments and criticisms at the conference on April 20th and for amendment at the Central Committee.