progressive labor &
community control

by Lucy St. John

In the last two articles we dealt with Progressive Labor’s practice of containment of the struggles of the trade union movement on the economic level, of their refusal to pose the objectively necessary task of the political struggle against capitalism within the working class.

The basis of this is PL’s inability to relate Marxist theory to the struggles of the working class. PL replaces the Marxist understanding of the strategic struggle for political power with tactics, with what works best at this moment. This is pragmatism. It is this method which leads PL to see struggles of the trade unions, the students, the Negroes isolated and only at their present level rather than seeing these struggles as a part of a whole system with the resolution to the crisis being one. Rather than many.

It is the recognition of the crisis, a political struggle for power, which unites these struggles. Rather than fighting to raise the struggles to the general political level PL adapts in each area to the present level of struggle, to the specific demands. For PL it is a matter of black power, student power, and bread and butter in the trade unions. The very conception of these struggles in this way keeps these struggles isolated.

anti-capitalist

Marxists understand that these struggles are part of a general struggle against the capitalist system which creates theills and that the only solution is through the struggle of the working class for power. Marxists begin with this understanding, with a class analysis. PL does not begin with this but with impressions of particular problems at the present moment. Thus their solutions to the particular problems are solutions at this moment within the system - basically they are reformist solutions. This can be clearly seen in PL’s demand for ‘community control’ as a solution to the problems of the ghetto.

schools

PL begins with the recognition of the rotten schools in the ghetto. They see that the cause of these conditions is the result of the policies of the ruling class through the Board of Education. But their solution is not one of a political struggle to get rid of the rotten school system. The ruling class, but one of replacing the Board of Education with smaller organizations within the present system. PL sees no need for community control because the big Board of NO-Education has been the big roadblock to all progress in the last ten years. Good people have fighting hard, but the Board is tying all our good ideas up in knots. But, if every neighborhood knew that its school was really controlled by people right in the neighborhood, the misleaders couldn’t fool us with their douce talk and phony plans.” In other words the solution to the problem lies in replacing the bad guys with ‘good people’ who live in the neighborhood.

But who are these ‘good people’ and what is their program? Exactly who is going to exercise control? What is going to be the political perspective of those who control? PL sees it as a vague coalition not based on class but on the good intentions of the participants. Control is to be exercised by working class parents who live in the community, by ‘community organizations that are concerned with public education,’ by teachers who ‘sincerely put the children first,’ and by ‘forward thinking groups.’ PL, gives no content or program to what community control will be except that it will be democratic and that through this democratic control ‘pressure’ will be applied until it ‘blows the lid off the city and its Board of Education.’

PL’s solution to the problems of the ghetto through democratic control by ‘forward-thinking’ people is the most reactionary form of utopian reformism. It is just unreal. The fact that the people who live in the community control it does not solve the basic problem of the cause of the problem, the capitalist system. Capitalism by its very nature does not contain within it the solution to the crisis. As long as production is organized around profit rather than need there will be no money to wipe out the ghetto, much less ‘solve’ the problem.

Democratic control is meaningless unless it is tied to a struggle, a political struggle, to get rid of the system which creates the rotten conditions. This demand raised separate from the struggle for power is based on the assumption that the solution to the problem can be gotten within the system.

class

There is another problem with the concept of community control. That is what class controls. What ideology controls. Marxists see that the emancipation of the whole society can come only through the instrument of the working class under the leadership of a vanguard party of the working class. The party is the only force which contains the program for the coming to power of the working class.

It is this very concept that PL seeks to reject in its proposal for a force to fight the ruling class made up of ‘forward thinkers’ and without a working class program. PL has returned to Messianism like so many other revisionists. PL seems to recognize at least unconsciously this problem and seeks to solve it by placing the conception that working class control is equal to working class control.

carmin: ‘marx is a honkie’

people having a voice within the capitalist system.

ideology

PL assumes that working class ideology, Marxism, is an inherent part of the nature of being working class. This of course is a ridiculous concept. In the first place working class ideology can only come from the Marxist party. If it were otherwise the working class would have come to power spontaneously long ago by the very fact they were workers. We might even say on this basis that the Democratic party has established socialism, since workers’ participate in the electoral process.

The concept of workers control is a class program for state power and that democratic control by the working class can only be exercised in its interests within a workers state.

This rejection by PL of a class analysis of fight for a working class program - this adaptation to the reformist struggle shows PL supporting a form participated in by-the working class organizationally but containing a bourgeois program. In its coalition with ‘progressive’ forces in the ghetto, in its failure to differentiate between a working class ideology and bourgeois ideological differences, PL makes it clear the PL ideology unable to pose the alternative of the independence of the working class. Since PL sees the ghetto as an all working part and all progressive, it finds it itself siding with the reactionary ideology of black nationalism. It is paralyzed when it finds the working class under the leadership of this anti-working class ideology.

This is very clearly seen in the teachers strike. It is hard cold fact that Lindsay and the City were able to enlist the support of the working class parents under the leadership of the black nationalists during the teachers strike to cross the picket lines and drive a further wedge between the teachers and these parents. But PL with its support to ‘black liberation’ cannot admit this. Rather they make a most unbelievable contention about the ‘complete failure of Lindsay and the Board of Education to bust the strike by using the parents as volunteers to urge the parents to send their children to school.’ They conclude that the ‘ruling class was unable to enlist the working class parents in an anti-class action.’

The fact that this tactic did not break the picket lines is not because the city did not enlist the support of working class parents against teachers, because they did, but because the teachers fighting for their class interests held out. PL even goes so far as to attack the teachers for fighting along class interests, for fighting ‘to get more money for teachers.”

problem

Progressive Labor of course opposes ‘reactionary’ black nationalists and favors ‘progressive’ ones. In this sense they are a bit more discriminating than the SWP which wholeheart-(Continued on Page 9)
by Fred Calhoun

NYC -- Big events have made it clearer than ever that the SSEE (welfare workers) is a future as an independent union and that it must complete a merger with Local 37 (an ACS/CWA local) in DC that represents supervisory personnel.

The response of the rank and file for union officers can only be seen as a vote of no-confidence for the Samuel Morgenstern leadership. Only fifty-five percent of the 6,500 members of Local 37 with the Morgenstern slate receiving about 2,000 votes, Literally every local in the state that red of those who voted, cast ballots for write-in candidates, revolted, in December, in disagreement with the election.

Positive

On the positive side was the over 500 votes cast for Dennis Cribben, some 200, of the numbers, who was running for treasurer as an independent candidate. He campaigned on a program of city-wide organizing to begin to organize now to win a supervisory contract in 1969, for merger with the CWA, and a program to unite the city labor movement in a fight against the political bosses of the law and the city's Office of Collective Bargaining, and for the state's Office of Collective Bargaining, to run their own candidate in '69 against Lindsay as the first step in the formation of a labor party.

What was clear to the majority of those voting for the Morgenstern slate was simply the continuation of the discredited Marge leadership. Morgenstern and company based their appeal on their 'experience' and tried as hard as possible to avoid any serious solution to the issues at hand. What did come out, however, sounded exactly like Marge's perspective--reliance upon political 'friends of labor' like Basilo and slum bordings dealing with labor bureaucrats like DeLury of the sanitationmen, who did nothing but sell out last summer's SSEE strike.

Morgenstern has made it clear there are no solutions for the problems of the SSEE, that he has no idea how to lead a better contract in '69, that he has no perspective for leading the SSEE into a merged local with 37 or leading a struggle against the labor bureaucracy which will strenuously oppose the uniting of the ranks of the city workers. At this time we warn SSEE members: Morgenstern is the greatest impediment to an honest merger with 37 insofar as he has no program to carry this out.

Miltorial?

Can we ignore the role of the organized factions in the SSEE. The Militant caucus, who ran four candidates in the 1968 elections and run by Underwood and Perea, also received over 500 votes. Their basis of campaign was to split the union, open a path to trade union militancy. As they were able to point out the sell-out qualities of the past and present leadership, they were able to create a certain support from the hundreds of workers who were disgusted with a leadership policy and direction.

Furthermore, they call for the continued isolation of the rank and file committee leadership -- thus leaving the SSEE vulnerable to any and all forms of management. With all their radical sloganeering, this group can only serve as the left cover for bureaucrats like Morgenstern; they can expose him, but they are incapable of leading a fight against him.

bankrupt!

The election clearly revealed the 1960's style of the Rank and File Committee. Having long decided that they did not want a merger, but a fighting club for the running of the SSEE in the coming period, this group, far from organizing a leftist opposition, in the best organized "opposition" in the union, refused to run a program that would put a fight into the smallest possible turn-out of votes. In other words, the "opposition" was a defense of the pro-capitalist approach if you can't win, wreck, demoralize.

This is an extremely dangerous and reactionary policy.

opposition

The problem is that the black community like the white community has deep class divisions within it. The black workers are oppressed like their white brothers. The white bourgeoisie is not oppressed--discriminated against yes, but not oppressed. These black bourgeois elements fundamentally take their support with the system of oppression against the oppressed including the oppression of the oppressed race. These men are 'brotherhood' of the Negro masses. They adapt to capitalism precisely to isolate the Negro masses from the white working class and to maintain their own dominant position within the Negro community. The only way to lead the Negro masses to freedom is to separate the working class against the black bourgeoisie as well as the whole system. Only by posing such a class program, which PL does not pose, can we organize a struggle between 'progressive' and 'reactionary'.

unify

Progressive Labor is for the unity of the black, student and trade union struggles. But unify can only be achieved programmatically. There is no such thing as a program which represents the fundamental interests of more than one class. In the modern period either you unite forces under the leadership of a working class around a program of struggle for the overthrow of capitalism or you unite forces on the basis of a common program which contains struggles within the capitalist system and thus aids in the preservation of the system.

In the 1930s the Stalinists came up with the program of the Popular Front. The working class, the progressive, capitalists, the middle class, the peasantry, we all got united around a program from program within the capitalist system. It could not be otherwise. The liberal capitalists will never give the working class a program of struggle for the overthrow of their own system but will be happy to have the working class join them to preserve their own system. The lines of alliance in actual practice encouraged the growth of fascism by preventing the working class from struggling independently.

We stated then and we state now that the working class must always fight on the basis of its own program for the destruction of capitalism through a workers government. In the course of such a fight the working class can and must rally the other social forces, sections of the middle class, the farmers, sections of the students, the lumpen poor masses. But it rallies such forces on the basis of its program.

Alliance

Progressive Labor today follows the same essential program as the Stalinists of the 1930s which led the working class to defeat and contributed to the rise of fascism. Of course they do not openly call for an alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie. However they in reality are blocking with this bourgeoisie on the basis of its program in the trade unions.

First within the black community by refusing to raise class demands they limit the struggle program only to democratic demands against the liberal bourgeoisie. They thus form a common front with this bourgeoisie through agents of the bourgeois state to help it carry through its program within the community for who have not consciously broken with capitalism represent capitalism ideologically. The failure to lay blame on all these elements for PL never seeks to change them to break them from their bourgeois ideology. It is the same type of viciousness with the trade union movement and in the trade unions. The student struggles are not seen politically but again as a block of militants around reform issues. In the trade unions this takes the form of a block over bread and butter issues with the trade union executive committee or rank and file struggle in the unions for a political class alternative to the capitalist parties.

Frontism

is expressed on another level when the question of unifying the black, student and trade union struggles is posed. Around Frontism would these struggles be pulled together? Since PL refuses to raise class political demands in any sector of the struggles it can only call for unifying these separate struggles around a common reformist program which does not transcend capitalism and thus repudiate illusions in essence a bloc by PL with the liberal bourgeoisie. So while PL attempts to support bourgeois politicians like Kennedy and McCarthy in its actual practice in the mass movement for the working class for the Negro, for the student does not transcend the program of the ruling class. This is why in essence Frontism is politically the same as the Communist Party.