

Proletarian Unity League

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

The Present Situation in the U.S. Communist Movement And Our Strategic Tasks

A. Strategy and the Main Form of Activity: On the Special Slogan "Win the Vanguard to Communism"

The U.S. communist movement is relatively united in viewing the general tasks of the first stage as the uniting of Marxist-Leninists and the winning of the class vanguard to communism. To realize the second task, many Marxist-Leninist groups call for making propaganda work our chief form of activity. To cite two examples:

"In this period of formation of the party, the primary focus of communist work must be to win the advanced workers to communism and the party... The tasks of the period require that propaganda be the chief form of activity..." (Organizing Committee for a Marxist-Leninist Party)

"We are now in the period of party-building and winning the vanguard to communism is our main task...in the period of party-building, propaganda must be our main form of activity." (**The Communist**, July 20, 1976)

This orientation follows the guidelines presented by Lenin:

"As long as it was (and inasmuch as it still is) a question of winning the proletariat's vanguard to the side of communism, priority went and still goes to propaganda work; even propaganda circles with all their parochial limitations, are useful under these conditions, and produce good results." (LCW 31, pp. 93-94)¹

The importance of propaganda work in this stage reflects the relative isolation of the communists from the workers' movement. The union of Marxism-Leninism with the workers' movement encompasses four general forms of activity. While somewhat distinct, the first two come under the general heading of propaganda. These are: 1) the study of historical

materialism and dialectical materialism, and attempts at the independent development of Marxism-Leninism through its application to the current situation; and 2) the propagation of the results of this study and its application. The first form of activity does not absolutely require ties to the workers' movement, though study and the elaboration of theory will have definite limitations without them. (The Emancipation of Labor group in Russia, for example, which the Bolsheviks credited with preparing the theoretical and ideological groundwork for the future Social-Democratic movement, had no practical link with the workers' movement of its time. (See the **History of the CPSU(B)**, pp. 7-13). In propagating the results of their study, Marxist-Leninists take their "first step" towards the workers' movement, concentrating on the most progressive elements of the working class, those who are most active and most dedicated to the proletarian cause. These workers act as the bridge between communism and the workers' movement. Insofar as Marxism has not been studied and developed to take account of our specific conditions, propaganda among the politically active workers will suffer.

The third general form of activity concerns the passage from the propaganda of Marxism among the relatively few politically active workers to widespread agitation. Having united with and trained communist propagandists, agitators, and organizers from the vanguard of the working class, the communist organization(s) has the forces to undertake agitation among the broad masses as its **main** form of activity. Of course the training of communists from among the best elements of the working class necessarily entails both agitational and organizational work. But without first consolidating these forces and developing an extensive organization, widespread and consistent agitation cannot be conducted successfully.

As Lenin describes it,

"This organization...must be composed of men and women who clearly understand the tasks of the Social-Democratic working-class movement and who have resolved to engage in a determined struggle against the present political system. It must combine within itself the socialist knowledge and revolutionary experience acquired from many decades of activity by the Russian revolutionary intelligentsia **with the knowledge of working-class life and conditions and the ability to agitate among the masses and lead them which is characteristic of the advanced workers.**" (emphasis added)

He goes on to quote Plekhanov,

"Propaganda in the study circles can be conducted by men. and women who have no mutual contact whatever with one another and who do not even suspect one another's existence; it goes without saying that the lack of organization always affects propaganda, too, but it does not make it impossible. However, in a period of great social turmoil, when the political atmosphere is charged with electricity, when now here and now there, from the most varied and unforeseen causes, outbreaks occur with increasing frequency, heralding the approaching revolutionary storm - in a word, when it is necessary either to agitate or remain in the rear, at such a time **only organized** revolutionary forces can seriously influence the progress of events." (CW 4, pp. 360-61)

According to the **History of the CPSU(B)**, the formation and activity of the "first real rudiment of a revolutionary party which was backed by the working-class movement," the St. Petersburg League of Struggle, followed this general outline.

In 1895 Lenin united all the Marxist workers' circles in St. Petersburg (there were already about twenty of them) into a single League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class...Lenin proposed to pass from the **propaganda** of Marxism among the few politically advanced workers who gathered in the propaganda circles to political **agitation** among the broad masses of the working class on issues of the day. This turn toward mass agitation was of profound importance for the subsequent development of the working-class movement in Russia. (pp. 13-14)

Mass action constitutes the fourth general form of activity. Without the preparatory work of propaganda and mass agitation, without the patient accumulation of sufficient forces, the Party can never become one of mass revolutionary action, but at most one of adventurist action.

The four general types of party-building activity are obviously interdependent. We can clarify this interdependence through an analogy to the building up of a regular army. In discussing the strategic task of "driving out the occupationists," Mao describes three **strategic stages**, which he defines by their respective military tasks.

"In the anti-Japanese war as a whole, regular warfare is primary and guerrilla warfare supplementary, for only regular warfare can decide the final outcome of the war. Of the three strategic stages (the defensive, the stalemate and the counter-offensive) in the entire process of the war in the country as a whole, the first and last are stages in which regular warfare is primary and guerrilla warfare will become supplementary. In the

intermediate stage guerrilla warfare will become primary and regular warfare supplementary..." (Mao, **Selected Military Writings**, p. 279)

"The stalemate follows the defensive, and the counter-offensive the stalemate. To each "strategic stage" correspond definite main tasks which must be advanced upon before the revolutionary forces can undertake new tasks. At the same time, they must pay attention to secondary tasks, since "if even one of them is not carried out, this is enough to prevent the fulfillment of the strategic aim." Although the successful prosecution of the anti-Japanese war hinged on the building of regular armies, the defensive strategic stage, and even the stalemate, demanded the building up of guerrilla units and later guerrilla armies."

"Without guerrilla warfare and without due attention to building guerrilla units and guerrilla armies and to studying and directing guerrilla warfare, we shall likewise be unable to defeat Japan. The reason is that...in the absence of the most extensive and persistent guerrilla warfare the enemy will entrench himself securely without any fear of attacks from behind, will inflict heavy losses on our main forces fighting at the front and will launch increasingly fierce offensives; thus it will be difficult for us to bring about a stalemate...But even if things do not turn out that way, other unfavorable circumstances will ensue, such as the inadequate building up of strength for our counter-offensive..." (**Ibid**, p. 280)

At any given time, one form of activity will also take priority in party-building. Other forms of activity will then have a secondary role in the party's or movement's life. Before a new form of activity can become the main form of activity of the revolutionary forces, either definite advances must be made in the work specified by the present activity or else objective conditions facing the revolutionary movement must change radically. A secondary role, however, does not imply a secondary importance. The completion of a given task connected to the main form of activity may in fact depend on other kinds of work. If the revolutionary forces treat the main form as the exclusive type of activity, and fail to carry on other types of work, then this may preclude any decisive advances in the focus of Party activity. For example, the development of theory depends upon all succeeding forms of activity, and the nature of the Party's activity also sets limits to the development of theory. (Marx systematically elaborated the theory of proletarian dictatorship only in the light of the Paris Commune.) On the other hand, the development of succeeding forms of activity requires the rudiments of a Marxist line, which in turn presupposes some study of Marxism. Similarly, the training of communist propagandists, agitators, and organizers from the vanguard of the working class occurs **mainly** through propaganda. But since this propaganda aims in part to change the advanced

workers' agitational and organizational activities into communist agitation and communist organization, effective propaganda work assumes continued work of this kind as the practical basis for their training. Further, the objective possibilities of the mass movements may require a temporary shift from propaganda to agitational work as the main form of activity, and even, in certain situations, to the organization of mass revolutionary struggle, before the Party has prepared itself to concentrate on those types of activities in a sustained way. In general, however, the main forms of activity reflect the Marxist-Leninists' relationship to or state of fusion with the workers' movement.

In addition, tasks which constitute the main form of activity at a given time in the Party's development obviously continue throughout the life of the Party, and may become the main form of activity at some later point. This occurs, for example, when communists work to re-establish the Party on a sound basis following its destruction at the hands of an opportunist line, or when the revolutionary movement has suffered a severe defeat (Indonesia, or the Philippines in the late sixties).

Certainly the present-day U.S. communist movement lacks "the ability to agitate among the masses and lead them which is characteristic of the advanced workers" (Lenin). Though their numbers are increasing, the advanced workers make up a distinct minority of the movement. In this sense, "inasmuch as it still is a question of winning the proletariat's vanguard to the side of communism," propaganda remains the main form of activity.

But winning the vanguard to communism does not define a **strategic period**, and for this reason, the main form of activity for winning the vanguard does not have any strategic significance for party-building.

In the first place, winning the vanguard does not at all specify a plan for party-building in any particular circumstances. If party-building is presently our central task, then "winning the vanguard to communism" merely restates that task in a situation where the vanguard is not committed to communism. Insofar as sections of the class vanguard do not belong to the Party, winning the vanguard is always the first priority of communists. As Lenin wrote of a different slogan,

"It is our duty always to intensify and broaden our work and influence among the masses. A Social-Democrat who does not do this is no Social-Democrat. No branch, group, or circle can be considered a Social-Democratic organization if it does not work at this end steadily and regularly..."

“But for the very reason that the work of intensifying and broadening our influence on the masses is always necessary, after each victory as after each defeat, in times of political quiescence as in the stormiest periods of revolution, we should not turn the emphasis upon this work into a special slogan or build upon it any special trend if we do not wish to court the risk of descending to demagoguery and degrading the aims of the advanced and only truly revolutionary class.” (Lenin, **CW 8**, pp. 453-454)

At the present time, the communist movement intensifies and broadens its influence among the masses mainly through the proletarian vanguard. A Marxist-Leninist who does not work to win the vanguard to communism is not a Marxist-Leninist. In other words, we take deepening our influence among the masses as a general slogan of communist work, and winning the vanguard to communism as a particular one for the whole first stage in the union of Marxism-Leninism with the workers' movement. But precisely because of its general applicability, we cannot raise this emphasis into a special slogan, into a strategic slogan for party-building.

Secondly, the slogan does not answer the fundamental questions of strategy. If strategy makes out the "main direction of attack," defining allies and disposing the revolutionary forces accordingly, then "propaganda work to win the vanguard" gives no such direction. The class vanguard for the most part does not belong to any communist organization or even support its own revolutionary cause. Whatever strategic orientation they adopted towards party-building, Marxist-Leninists would still have to set out to win the politically active workers. But in what direction are they to set out? For whom and against whom? Slogans about winning the vanguard don't tell us. Such a perspective claims to build a communist party, yet "does not know where the bourgeois line is." Against that bourgeois line, in its concrete, present form, party-building strategy must aim the main blow.

Footnote

¹See also Stalin, CW 5, pp. 82-83:

“To win the vanguard of the proletariat to the side of communism (i.e., build up cadres, create a Communist Party, work out the programme, the principles of tactics). Propaganda as the chief form of activity.”