

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

C. The Party Principle

What Lenin calls the "party principle" (see, for example, CW 10, pp. 75-82) consists of three related and mutually dependent levels. It represents the necessity of the **ideological, political, and organizational** independence of the proletariat from the bourgeoisie. Both within the pre-party period and throughout the life of the party, different levels play the dominant role, and other levels a subordinate role.

THE IDEOLOGICAL LEVEL OF THE PARTY PRINCIPLE refers to the independence of proletarian theory and the proletarian world outlook from those of a other classes. The theory of the proletariat contains two different parts: historic materialism, the science of history; and dialectical materialism, Marxist philosophy which represents **theoretically** the proletarian conception of the world. Historical materialism differs from all other sciences in that it is necessary to a specific class, the proletariat. Only the proletariat can use it to transform the world. This gives the proletariat's theory its revolutionary character in the fullest sense of the word. Only the point of view of class exploitation makes possible historical materialism, and only the class struggle of the proletariat makes possible the point of view of class exploitation. For this reason historical materialism is unique among the sciences in that it represents the proletarian point of view.

Historical materialism is the theory of the various modes of production which have appeared or will appear in history (slave, feudal, capitalist, communist, etc.), their structures and functions, and the forms of transition between one and another (the transition from feudalism to capitalism, for example). As such, it concerns itself not only with the economy or economic level of a given mode of production or individual society, but also with its political and juridical (legal) relations and with its ideological relations. Marxists refer to these last two levels, the political/juridical and the ideological, as the "superstructure" of a given mode of production or individual society. The historical materialist theory of the political level contains two areas of great

importance to party-building: the theory guiding the proletariat's struggle for political or state power, and the theory of the party (including the party principle itself).

THE POLITICAL LEVEL OF THE PARTY PRINCIPLE refers to the political independence of the proletariat in its struggle against all forms of class exploitation. Although the proletariat must struggle against the bourgeoisie and other ruling classes on all fronts (economic, political, and ideological), each of which may become dominant at one time or another, the decisive struggle takes place at the political level, i.e., the struggle for state power. All forms of proletarian struggle ultimately aim at victory at this level, at the level of the relations of domination (force) between different classes. In this fight for political power, the proletariat acts according to its own class interests, interests which are distinct from those of all other classes. These interests lie either with overthrowing the exploiting classes or strengthening its dictatorship over them, and finally with the abolition of all classes.

To guide its fight for power "in the field," (its political independence), the proletariat must elaborate an independent line for the weakening and the overthrow of the existing relations of domination, and then for the consolidation of its own forcible domination of the former ruling classes. We call this line **political line** in the strict sense. The political line which directs the proletariat's political struggle belongs to proletarian theory. The proletariat's political line is that "guide to action" which best advances the proletariat's final interests in a given situation. Whether to attack or retreat, accumulate forces or "storm the gates of heaven" (Marx's description of the struggle of the Paris Communards), when to shift from one front to another, form or dissolve alliances with other classes or class fractions, or utilize one form of organization and abandon another—all depends on what best accords with the proletariat's irreducible interests.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL OF THE PARTY PRINCIPLE refers to the necessity for the proletariat to organize itself into a political party independent of the parties of all other classes. Marx emphasized that there exists a precondition to the political struggle of the proletariat.

The working class cannot act, as a class, except by constituting itself into a political party, distinct from, and opposed to, all old parties formed by the propertied classes. (Resolution at the 1871 London Conference of the International Workingmen's Association)

If the proletariat's political independence is reflected in activity independent of all other classes because it is guided by its specific class interests, that activity can only take shape to the extent that the proletariat has an

independent organizational expression, its Party. The Party provides the means or instrument for guiding proletarian political practice. We call party-building line the line which guides the construction of this organization. Again, party-building line belongs to proletarian theory, to a specific area of historical materialism, but directs the proletariat's struggle at the organizational level. This relationship between the constitution of the class into a political party and its political struggle has important consequences for any pre-party period. We will examine these in the next chapter, where we criticize the slogan that "political line is key" in the present period.

Since the levels of the party principle are interrelated, absolutizing one or another level will endanger the life of the party. To insist upon the proletariat's ideological independence while ignoring its independent political activity will restrict the Party's role to that of a propaganda circle or political book club. To emphasize the proletariat's political independence while neglecting its distinct ideology will compromise the proletariat's political struggle and lead to reformist politicking or adventurism. An all-consuming concern with its organizational independence, on the other hand, will reduce the Party to a sect unable to intervene in the course of historical events. In the establishment of the Party, the struggle between Marxism and various anti-Marxist tendencies ranges over all levels. At any particular moment, however, it concentrates itself at one level. At that time, the formation and strengthening of the Marxist-Leninist Party will depend on the correct handling of the two-line struggle at that level. Without a resolution of the contradictions which have made that level principal, the Party cannot advance on its general tasks.

The early history of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party illustrates this point. In the beginning phases of the movement, the struggle concentrated on the ideological plane, on differences in class stand and world outlook:

We fought opportunism on the fundamental problems of our world conception, on the questions of our programme, and the complete divergence of aims inevitably led to an irrevocable break between the Social-Democrats and the liberals who had corrupted our legal Marxism, (Lenin, **CW 7**, p. 404)

With unity around the "fundamental problems of our world conception," the struggle for the Party shifted to another level. After the Russian Social-Democrats had achieved unity against the liberal conception of class struggle, new disputes broke out over the nature of Social-Democratic activity:

"...the differences among the circles were over the **direction** the work was to take, work which at the time was new to them. I noted at the time (in **What is to be Done?**) that these seemingly minor differences were actually of immense importance, since at the beginning of this new work, at the beginning of the Social-Democratic movement, the definition of the general nature of the work and movement would very substantially affect propaganda, agitation, and organization. All subsequent disputes between the Social-Democrats concerned the direction of the Party's political activity on specific issues. But at that time the controversy was over the most general principles and the fundamental aims of **all** Social-Democratic policy generally." (Lenin, **CW 13**, p. 106)

And at another point, organizational questions became dominant:

"...the adoption of a programme together with the Bundists, far from leading to the centralization of our common work, did not even save us from a split. Unity on questions of programme and tactics is an essential but by no means a sufficient condition for Party unity, for the centralization of Party work...The latter requires, in addition, unity of organization." (Lenin, **CW 7**, p. 387)

Thus unity achieved at one level (political line, say) does not necessarily extend to another (conceptions of organization, for example). The struggle for communist unity around program has a different history and faces different conditions than that around democratic centralism. Correspondingly, the struggle for unity will take a different course, confronting different obstacles specific to that level. In sum, at each level, unity must be worked for.

We should not confuse the dominant level at any one moment, however, with that which determines the entire party-building process. All deviations ultimately have their sources in anti-Marxist principles and the bourgeois world outlook. Struggle against a deviation at one level of the party principle will necessarily compel Marxist-Leninists to examine the ideological roots of that deviation, the ideological source which gives it justification and inspiration. In Lenin's struggle against opportunism in matters of organization at the time of the Second RSDLP Congress, the deviation at the organizational level had a "left" character, in "the principle of **anarchism**, as the sole really definite principle." (**Ibid.**, p. 405) Yet through the "purely **ideological** struggle over the basic principles of organization," Lenin demonstrated that the ideological source of these errors tended increasingly towards revisionism, towards Economism:

"Their allies proved to be all those elements who in theory or practice had deviated from the principles of strict Social-Democracy (the Economists, Rabocheye-Dyelo-ists, etc.), for only the circle atmosphere could preserve the ideological individuality and the influence of these elements, whereas the Party atmosphere threatened to absorb them or deprive them of all influence...conscious that **its fundamental position** is indefensible from the **standpoint of the Party's interests**, it is busy searching out real and imaginary differences to provide an ideological screen for that position; and in this search, seizing on one slogan one day and on another the next, it is turning more and more for its material to the Right wing of the Party--the former opponents of **Iskra--and** drawing ever closer to them **ideologically**, trying to rehabilitate their theories, which the Party has rejected, and to turn the Party's **ideological life** back to what had already seemed the bygone period of vagueness of principle and ideological wavering and vacillation." (CW 7, pp. 455-56)

By tracing deviations at one level to their fundamental assumptions, Marxist-Leninists build unity around the foundations of their world outlook. Historically, the unity established through struggle around a very few key problems has provided the ideological basis for the formation of most Communist Parties.

To sum up: in determining the strategy and tactics of party-building, we have three interrelated tasks: (1) locating the main level at which the struggle for the party currently rages; (2) identifying the main deviation at that level; and (3) uncovering the ideological roots of that deviation. In the following section, we will outline a strategic orientation based on an analysis of these problems.