

Proletarian Unity League

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

### Chapter 2: The Danger from the "Left"

#### E. The Class Vanguard or the "Active Minority"? Revolutionary Impatience in the Struggle for the Party

For a number of years, the communist movement was dominated by a perspective on our tasks which tended to gloss over the necessity of concentrating on propaganda work among the advanced workers. In defense of the party-building line of the Revolutionary Union, the October League, and **The Guardian**, Carl Davidson wrote,

"An important achievement of the new communist movement in the past several years has been its transition from student-oriented propaganda circles to agitational work in the mass movements."

(The **Guardian**; reprinted on the editorial page of the April 1974 **Call**)

In the union of Marxism-Leninism with the workers' movement, this line distinguished only two main forms of activity (in contrast to the position outlined in Chapter One): first, "student-oriented" propaganda circles; then, agitational work in the mass movement. Davidson's view did not recognize propaganda work among the politically active workers as the main form of activity at any point. Instead, it criticized a primary emphasis on propaganda work as "setting up study circles around Leninist classics which advanced workers will 'gravitate to' rather than be actively won to through the example set by communists in the mass movement." (**Ibid.**)

Many groups attacked the Davidson/OL/RU line as a "Right opportunist" line, for reasons we will examine later. Because it downplayed the role of propaganda, they argued, it had a Rightist character. But in fact, as we will see later in this chapter, the belittling of theoretical work and propaganda can proceed from both the "Left" and the Right. The Davidson position belittles the necessity of propaganda in favor of revolutionizing the masses through action. In relation to the present strategic period of party-building, it represents a "left" line.

The Davidson line, as implemented by groups like the RU/RCP and the OL, **substitutes** the action of revolutionary ideologues for that of the class vanguard. Instead of patiently consolidating the vanguard of the class around Marxism-Leninism, and then passing to widespread agitation as the main form of activity, the Davidson/RCP/OL line sends the communist forces into the mass movements **in the place of** the class vanguard. The revolutionary ideologues from the mass movements of the 'sixties by and large cannot match the advanced workers for either their knowledge of working class life or their ability to agitate among and lead the masses. Fusing the working class movement with Marxism-Leninism therefore demands focusing on propaganda work among the proletarian vanguard, so that the communist forces can successfully pass over to widespread agitation. But the Davidson line assigns the role of the class vanguard to the revolutionary intelligentsia. "Left" opportunism, and particularly its ideological source, anarchism, have traditionally given this kind of preeminent importance to small groups of intellectuals:

"Here again, it is Bakunin rather than Marx whose influence is apparent. For Bakunin set great store by the disaffected students and intellectuals, and assigned them a key role in the impending world revolution. Bakunin's prophetic vision of an all-encompassing class war, in contrast to Marx's more narrowly conceived struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie, made ample room for this additional fragmented element of society for which Marx had only disdain. In Marx's view, rootless intellectuals did not comprise a class of their own, nor were they an integral component of the bourgeoisie." (**Bakunin on Anarchy**, from the introduction by the anarchist Sam Dolgoff, p. xviii). (It may be worth noting that Comrade Davidson once advocated a "student vanguard" perspective in SDS).

Instead of propaganda, the Davidson/OL/RU line relies chiefly on **activity** in the mass movements to revolutionize the advanced workers. The exemplary behavior of communists in the mass movements will largely bring the workers to communism. This approach stems from the "Left," not the Right. It assigns the role of a Marxist-Leninist vanguard to an "active minority," and assumes that a revolutionary world view will arise spontaneously in the process of mass action. Subjective activity takes the place of ideological struggle. In the final analysis, the Davidson approach to winning the vanguard is almost a theory of heroes, and smacks of adventurism. "Politics without the masses are adventurist politics," Lenin once said. To which we might add that party-building without the advanced workers is adventurist party-building.

Stalin warns that communists must judge a trend not by its "slogans and resolutions (which cannot be trusted), but by their deeds, by their actions."

If the Davidson/OL/RU line did represent a Right deviation, we would expect that their deeds and actions would demonstrate as much. But it is here, in the practice of the voluntarist substitutionism advocated by Davidson, that the "left" character of that line emerges most clearly. One need only look at our demonstrations, our forums or our celebrations of working-class holidays. Do they point to the submergence of the communist forces in an amorphous mass movement? Or do they starkly outline the sectarian, adventurist character of a large part of the communist movement's work? Isolated demonstrations which rally only an organization's members and close supporters; "intermediate workers organizations," union caucuses, and Fightback Organizations made up mainly of cadre; and a communist movement still largely drawn from the intermediate strata--these are the fruits of at least seven years of steady "transition from student-oriented propaganda circles to agitational work in the mass movements." The continued isolation from the workers' movement which these activities represent does not express the Right tailism and passivity of the labor aristocracy or the self-satisfied liberal professor. It expresses the "left" impatience of the revolutionary intelligentsia.

This discussion of the Davidson/OL/RU approach to propaganda does not exhaust the "left" voluntarist lines on winning the vanguard to communism. Since Lenin devoted considerable attention to the importance of propaganda among the "best elements" of the working class, and since, on a more practical level, the Davidson line did not succeed in winning over the class vanguard, a reaction to it set in. But because this reaction analyzed the Davidson/OL/RU approach as Right opportunist, the reaction did not correct the letter's Leftism"; it pushed "Leftism" to even further excesses. A number of groups in and around the old "Revolutionary Wing" <sup>1</sup> began criticizing most agitational work in the name of "concentrating on propaganda among the advanced," as if the class vanguard will simply walk into their offices and sign up for propaganda. This utterly "left" view cannot base itself on successful work in winning over the best elements of the working class, work which in part consists precisely in transforming the agitational and organizational work of the advanced workers into communist agitation and communist organization. One section of the "Revolutionary Wing" went even further, and defined advanced workers according to Lenin's description in "A Retrograde Trend in Russian Social Democracy," where Lenin characterizes the advanced workers as already Social-Democrats (communists in our day) and the **average** workers as workers who "strive ardently for socialism, participate in workers' study circles, read socialist newspapers and books, participate in agitation, and differ from the preceding stratum only in that they cannot become fully independent leaders of the Social-Democratic working class movement." (CW 4, p. 281) So that section set off in search of the "advanced" not the advanced workers of the U.S. proletariat, of course,

but the advanced workers of books. Consequently, the "left" correction to the "left" line produces just as little consistent propaganda work among working class activists.

In summary, if we define the main danger as the chief obstacle to decisive advances on our current tasks, then a sectarianism of the ultra-left type presents the main obstacle to clearing up our crippling disagreements; a sectarianism of the ultra-left type presents the main obstacle to overcoming our disorganization; and a sectarianism of the ultra-left type presents the main obstacle to fusing with the working class movement.

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### **Footnote**

<sup>1</sup> Before PRRWO and RWL took it over.