

Proletarian Unity League

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

Chapter 2: The Danger from the "Left"

F. Some Other Situation and Somebody Else's Danger

Many revolutionary groups and individuals within the communist movement believe that Right opportunism constitutes the immediate danger to the Marxist-Leninist forces at this time. In our view, this perspective which often accompanies the claim that "political line is key," has an abstract and undialectical character. We believe it is based on historical circumstances which do not exist in the U.S. movement at present, and that the policies it implies have grave consequences for the immediate future of that movement. In this and succeeding sections, we will examine a little more closely the conclusion that right opportunism is the main danger.

As we understand it, the analysis that right opportunism constitutes the main danger to the U.S. communist movement has three parts. First, right opportunism has historically posed the greatest danger to the communist movement. Second, internationally, as the Chinese Communist Party has pointed out, "modern revisionism is the main danger in the international working class movement." (**Workers of All Countries, Unite, Oppose Our Common Enemy!**, p. 322) Lastly, right opportunism manifests itself today in tailism, economism, liquidating theoretical struggle, and promoting amateurishness.

This analysis has an abstract quality. For example, consider the first point in the light of Lenin's actions at the Third Congress of the Third International. Lenin could easily have stood up and repeated "right opportunism has historically been the greatest danger to the Marxist movement." Thirty years of the Second International had demonstrated as much. Therefore, he might have concluded, right opportunism poses the greatest danger to this Congress of the Third International, Many communists argued in this way. Lenin did not. He did indicate that--

"The petty-bourgeois democrats in the capitalist countries, whose foremost sections are represented by the Second and Two-and-A-Half Internationals, serve today as the mainstay of capitalism, since they retain an influence

over the majority, or a considerable section, of the industrial and commercial workers and office employees..." (CW 32, p. 454)

But he went on to summarize his position as follows:

"And the essence of the matter, i.e., the appraisal **and correction** of the innumerable mistakes made by the United Communist Party of Germany during the March action of 1921, has been and continues to be of enormous importance. In order to explain and correct these mistakes (which some people enshrined as gems of Marxist tactics) **it was necessary** to have been on the **Right** wing during the Third Congress of the Communist International. Otherwise the **line** of the Communist International would have been a **wrong** one."

Lenin on the Right wing! Wasn't he conciliating the greatest danger "historically"? Certainly not. Tactics do not base themselves on the "historical in this abstract, universal sense. On the contrary, the science of tactics consists in leadership in a real, not an "epochal" conjuncture. The commander guiding his or her troops on a long march does not say, "historically, during this march, deserts have constituted the main danger. Therefore, fill your water tanks and throw away unnecessary baggage." He or she examines the actual terrain, and, maintaining the general course of march, draws specific tactical conclusions from it, such as, "We are in a swamp. Therefore, do not throw away the life-rafts, but inflate them and place the provisions there."

When Marxist-Leninists speak of revisionism (or right opportunism) as the main danger historically, they refer to an historical **tendency** which only asserts itself over a relatively long period of time. The time span preceding the formation of a party, including the several strategic periods we have mentioned earlier, does not necessarily have this same historical stature. There is no reason to suppose, a priori, that right opportunism constitutes the main danger to the actual formation of a U.S. Marxist-Leninist party. In situations where Marxist-Leninists have not made an organizational and ideological break with a modern revisionist party, Right opportunism would threaten party-formation in this immediate way. But in the U.S., various organizational breaks with revisionism occurred more than a decade ago; the vast majority of Marxist-Leninists have not received their training within the revisionist orbit; and the Marxist-Leninist movement does not include substantial numbers of people generally recognized as the social basis for revisionism.¹ Moreover, the experience of the last fifteen years in the U.S. demonstrates that, following the organizational break with revisionsim, ultra-leftism has "historically" figured as the main danger to the formation of

a Marxist-Leninist Party (the Provisional Organizing Committee, the Progressive Labor Party, etc.).²

Now in essence, all errors are Right errors--by compromising the proletariat's many-faceted struggle to end all exploitation, they aid the class enemy. The two-line struggle within the workers' movement reflects and belongs to the class war. Either a line represents the working class and the genuine Lefts (without quotation marks), or it aids the Right of Reaction. But this "essence" may take two different forms--the ultra- or pseudo-Left, and the Right. To strengthen the proletarian line requires an ability to distinguish between the "form" a deviation assumes and "travels under" on the one hand, and the "essence" it expresses on the other.

At the level of **historical tendencies**, in the era of imperialism,³ the fundamental danger to revolution comes from the Right. Imperialism creates a powerful social, political, and ideological basis for reformism and revisionism within the working class movement. It follows that the fundamental danger to **the party of revolution**, to the Party of the proletariat, also comes from the Right, from the revisionist adaptation to reformism within the working class movement. (This adaptation can take at least two forms: a Right liquidation of the Party in the face of bourgeois reformism, as in the case of the CPUSA during the 'fifties and 'sixties; or the growth of revisionist "mass parties" which come to resemble old-style social-democratic organizations, as in most Western European countries.) If we understand **the building of the party** as extending from the pre-party period to and through the seizure and consolidation of power by the proletariat, then the fundamental danger to the construction of the revolutionary party also comes from the Right, from reformism and revisionist adaptations to reformism. But since party-building and party-formation are two different things and have two different historical scales, this does not mean that right opportunism constitutes the immediate danger to the actual formation of the Marxist-Leninist Party.⁴

The same kinds of objections apply to the second argument for right opportunism as the main danger: because modern revisionism is the main danger in the international working class movement, it constitutes the main danger to our communist movement. What is true in most places is not necessarily true in any particular place. For example, the Sixth Congress of the Comintern held that "within the Communist Parties...the main deviation is to the right of the correct political line. This is shown in the survivals of 'legalism,' in passivity during strikes, in an incorrect attitude towards social-democracy (e.g., the resistance in France to the decisions of the 9th ECCI Plenum)" (Extracts from Theses of the 6th Comintern Congress on the International Situation and the Tasks of the Communist International, in

Jane Degras, Vol. II, p. 464). This appraisal did not prevent Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Communist Party from concluding that several "Left" lines had posed the main danger in the Chinese Party during most of the Third Period analyzed by the Sixth Congress.

Many revolutionaries, less exacting in their investigation, reasoned that what predominated internationally must predominate nationally. Thankfully, Mao Tse-tung did not. The revolutionary commander does not claim, "Throughout the world, the shortage of water is the main danger on the water question; therefore, it poses the most immediate threat here." Rather, he or she asks, "Here and now, what constitutes the immediate danger?"

Further, confusion of the "international **working class** movement" with our own **communist** movement mistakes the general for the particular, and manifest a certain sectarianism as well. The working class movement, whether viewed internationally or not, comprises more than the Marxist-Leninist forces and workers magically free of any political tendency. On the contrary, the working class movement includes the most varied political trends, from communism through revisionism to social-democratic, anarchist and even Catholic labor tendencies. Whether revisionism -- i.e., the influence of the CPUSA and its circles, the only concrete way to understand the term revisionism in the U.S. -- poses the most important menace to the development of the U.S. working class movement need not concern us here. We merely wish to point out that if it did, that would not contradict the proposition that "left" sectarianism looms as the **immediate** danger to the Marxist-Leninist movement. Social-chauvinism was the chief obstacle to the development of the working class movement in the Europe of 1920; that did not blind Lenin to the more immediate threat of Left-Wing Communism in the Comintern of 1920,

"What do these facts show? They show that the question of the fight against the Rights and "ultra-Lefts" must be put not abstractly, but concretely, depending on the political situation...Ought we to fight against both "ultra-Lefts" and Rights? Hansen asks. Of course, we ought to. We settled that question long ago. This dispute is not about that... The point is that we are faced not with the abstract question of combating Rights and "ultra-Lefts" in general, but with the concrete question of the immediate tasks of the German Communist Party at the present moment." (Stalin, "The Fight Against Right and 'Ultra-Left' Deviations," CW 8, pp. 3 and 7)

* * *

The extreme disorganization of the communist movement fosters and preserves ideological and political confusion within it. Different groups spring up which seize upon this or that aspect of reality, raise their views of it to the level of an entire political line, and erect a trend out of phrases and slogans. Single groups and even single individuals may mistake or combine some assumptions of the ultra-left with revisionist assumptions. This makes the sorting out of "left" and Right errors all the more difficult.

The "Left" trend's natural aversion to the analysis of "left" opportunism has compounded these difficulties. It attempts to lay almost all our shortcomings at the doorstep of revisionist or reformist influence. But the grounds cited for this influence--bowing to spontaneity, economism, liquidation of theory coupled with the "building of the mass movement" and the promotion of amateurishness--do not prove the case. In fact, as we will see, the evidence points in the opposite direction.

Footnotes

¹ "The revisionism of the present is distinguished from that of the past also because of its social-economic base. For the old opportunism this base consisted of the petty-bourgeoisie, especially, of the aristocracy of the working class. For the present revisionism, this base is broader: in the capitalist countries, besides the workers' aristocracy, the working class bureaucracy, which, in the present conditions has grown excessively, has become a base for revisionism. Into this stratum enters all the army of the working class employees, officials, functionaries of the parties, of the unions, of the other organizations of the masses, of the publishing houses, of the economic enterprises, which are managed by the revisionists and which in essence have a capitalist character." ("About Some Actual Problems of the Struggle Against Modern Revisionism," Fiqret Shehu, in **Some Questions of Socialist Construction in Albania and of the Struggle Against Revisionism**, p. 150)

² Predictably, some forces have taken to distorting the history of anti-revisionist activity in this country in order to protect their own party-building lines. The Workers Viewpoint Organization holds that:

"Propaganda to win over the advanced is our chief form of activity throughout the whole first step of party-building, the step of consolidating and training the vanguard, the cadre core that will lead the masses to revolution...And through this whole first step, right deviations from this task, the tendency to underestimate the consciousness of the advanced, sink to

trade unionism, lower the level of our propaganda, and not grasp tightly the necessary, immediate and universal preparation for the dictatorship of the proletariat are the main danger." (WV, August, 1976, p. S-2)

We have already dealt with the notion that the main form of activity can be mechanically deduced from one or another stage in the Party's development and applied to each and every strategic party-building period which falls within that stage (see Chapter One). It is false theoretically and historically. But as a summary of the historical experience of the international communist movement, the WVO's position on the main danger (shared by a number of other groups) has no equal for its completely ahistorical character. It fails to consider the party-building experiences of Albania, Britain, Korea, the U.S., or the first two periods in the formation of the RSDLP, to name but some of the cases in which "left" deviations posed the main danger to the formation of a Communist Party. But never mind those international experiences--they took place far from the "nationally specific" forms of U.S. revisionism which the WVO claims to put so much stress on. And never mind the formation of the CPUSA--that occurred over fifty years ago. What about the history of struggle for a new Marxist-Leninist Party since the revisionist capture of the CPUSA? Did "Right deviations from this task" really pose the main danger to the Provisional Organizing Committee from 1958-1968, or the Progressive Labor Movement, and then the PLP, from 1962-1970, or to the CPUSA(M-L) in 1965, or to Hammer and Steel in the early '60s? For all its talk about "nationally specific" this or that, the WVO isn't telling on the "nationally specific" POC and PLP, or the "nationally specific" anti-revisionist movement since 1958. It will only say that

"When the mass movements of the 1960's were flowing furiously ...the two major attempts to rebuild the party that broke out of the "C"CPUSA, the Provisional Organizing Committee (POC) and the Progressive Labor Party (PLP) had also already degenerated or were going down fast." (**Ibid., p. S-9**)

Well, from what did these organizations degenerate--Right or "left" deviations? At most, WVO has written that "pragmatism," which it regards as both the philosophical basis of Right opportunism and as an entire "line" (WV **Journal**, No. 4, p. 97) in its own right, was the main cause of the PLP's degeneration (see WV **Journal**, Nos. 2 and 3). But the WVO doesn't **have** to say because, you see, "the anti-revisionist communist movement" has only existed since 1968! Yes, that's right:

"In the eight years of our anti-revisionist communist movement, the struggle of these trends has so far carved out three definite periods." (WV, August 1976, p. 8-9)

the first of which begins in the mid-1960's (according to the "eight year" figure, 1968), after the POC, PLP, etc. have "degenerated" from unknown ideological causes. This kind of history certainly makes the WVO's task of summing up experience that much easier, but it won't save their position on the main danger, nor disguise their profound ideological affinity with the PLP. "Marxism is all-powerful because it is true," said Lenin. Ultra-leftism is basically a paper tiger because it is false.

³ In the pre-imperialist era, particularly in those countries where large-scale capitalist production had not developed widely, anarchism of various types frequently posed the main danger to the revolutionary forces. This held true in the First International in its later years, and in Russia during the 'eighties and 'nineties. For somewhat different reasons, it also held true for the U.S. revolution during the 1880's.

⁴ In the preface to our two earlier pamphlets, we wrote: "...white opportunism in political line constitutes the fundamental threat to the construction of a revolutionary party." The difference between that earlier formulation and the ones found here needs some self-critical explanation.

Our earlier formulation came about in an attempt to specify somewhat the historical content of opportunism, both "left" and Right, in the U.S. We believed and still believe that the particular weakness of the U.S. labor movement and its successive vanguards is bound up with its stand towards the white-supremacist national oppression of the Afro-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Asian-American and Native American peoples, and the system of white-skin privileges with which the bourgeoisie has attempted to shore up an uneasy base of support among the masses of European descent. We have called the policy of compromise with that oppression "white-supremacist opportunism," or "white opportunism." We emphasized it in an over-reaction to the ultra-left's practice of contenting itself with universal generalities about modern revisionism. We also sought to bring out the fundamental strategic unity of "left" economism and Right revisionism in their strategic conceptions of national oppression, the split in the house of labor, and how to destroy the "color line" which the U.S. bourgeoisie has drawn across the workers' movement.

Though historically the main responsibility for the vanguard of labor's betrayal of the Afro-American people, the Chicano people, the Asian American peoples and other oppressed nationalities lies with the Right, with reformism and revisionism, the ultra-left has made a contribution as well. The history of U.S. Trotskyites provides one example. With a social base among petit-bourgeois intellectuals and two white craft unions (Sailors' Union of the Pacific and the Minneapolis Teamsters), the Trotskyite

movement of the 'thirties dressed some of the most white racist politics in the labor movement in the clothing of militant trade-union and of course "anti-Stalinist" rhetoric. Not only can a practical compromise with national oppression and the system of white-skin privileges come from the "Left" as well as the Right, but it can also come from predominantly oppressed nationality revolutionary organizations, as well as predominantly white revolutionary organizations. (Historically, of course, revolutionary organizations among oppressed nationalities have not posed even a significant fraction of the threat to a proletarian line on this question that predominantly white ones have.)

We think this earlier formulation had four main problems. First, it gave the impression that we equated the strategic errors of "left" revisionism with those of Right revisionism. Although we certainly held that the white chauvinist class-collaborationism of the Right **tendentally** posed a far greater danger to the revolution than that of the ultra-left, our formulation did not reflect it. Instead it dealt "even-handedly" with two very unequal errors. Second, the formulation **in effect** substituted "white opportunism" for revisionism. This substitution obscured the danger of the U.S. revisionist trend within the working class movement, reducing that trend to its line on a particular set of strategic questions. Though we continue to believe that this set of strategic questions is key for the overall strategic line of the revolutionary proletariat, a correct stand on these questions alone cannot orient the ideological and political struggle against the revisionist trend as a whole. Both these errors stemmed from a one-sided preoccupation with the general content of both "left" and Right errors in the U.S. Workers' movement. Further, they reflected too unilateral an emphasis on specific U.S. conditions, which if carried through consistently would separate the nationally specific characteristics of modern revisionism in this country from the international revisionist trend.

Third, as a corollary to this second problem, the formulation distinguished a political line from its ideological roots in an incorrect way. We had attempted to emphasize both the relative autonomy of political line, and, more importantly, the central place of politics and political struggle. But this gave political line a kind of autonomy it does not have in respect to the ideological basis of modern revisionism or "left" revisionism.

Fourth, the formulation did nothing to combat a "left" opportunist deviation which had appropriated similar phraseology. In fact, it helped perpetuate some confusions which have grown up due to the influence of this deviation, and to the influence of "left" economist deviations which have an interest in maintaining this confusion. "Left" forces on both sides of the question have attempted to "make a trend out of isolated formulas" (Lenin, **CW 16**, p. 38)

like "white opportunism" and "white-skin privileges." One side has tried to erect an all-embracing explanation of the weakness of the communist and workers' movements, while the other has sought to cover over the material basis of white-supremacist ideology by constantly baiting a so-called "white-skin privilege line." The collusion between the two sides has given rise to the notion that "white opportunism" refers not to a definite political line but to the "opportunism of whites." On the one hand, we held that a line commits white supremacist opportunist errors and cannot free itself from those errors fundamentally because that line is revisionist; it is not revisionist fundamentally because it is white-supremacist opportunist. At the same time, we used a formulation which had become associated with a very different conception, and which many revolutionary people understood simply as white chauvinism. We acted like our own theoretical system would somehow purge the term of its historical and everyday connotations, which of course it did not. This fourth problem, like the third, stemmed from a certain type of "left" subjectivism which expressed itself in a theoreticist deviation.

We expect to deal with these and related issues more thoroughly in a future publication.