

Proletarian Unity League

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

Chapter 2: The Danger from the "Left"

I. The Amateurishness of Our "Lefts"

Most communist groups agree that amateurish methods of work retard the development of our movement. They also agree that the continued hold of amateurishness on the Marxist-Leninists must have some cause. Here, however, disagreement sets in. The "Left-Wing" of our movement believes that the persistent problem of amateurishness points to the powerful influence of right opportunism, revisionism, and reformism. They argue by analogy to struggles within the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party, where the small-circle spirit came to associate itself with the Right economist trend. Therefore the "Left-Wing" of our movement concludes that the unabated (indeed, reinvigorated) circle spirit must support itself upon right opportunist theories, and that the struggle against disunity demands an all-out assault on amateurishness and the Right danger.

We see amateurishness in a different light. Amateurishness figures inevitably in a growing movement which draws principally upon elements of the population inexperienced in all matters of revolutionary work. The spontaneous, undirected growth of the U.S. communist movement insured this amateurish quality. Further, the longer disunity plagues the movement, the stronger amateurish styles of work and forms of organization will become. The crude divisions of labor possible in the many small organizations, their irrational duplications of efforts, the selfish, competitive, antagonistic relationships which prevent the widest dissemination of valuable experiences, theoretical advances, and all forms of practical and ideological training, and perhaps most of all the diversion of priceless energies into the all-consuming inter-group struggle prohibit the development of professional methods of work. Therefore, those who justly desire to rid the communist movement of amateurishness must first address themselves to the problem of disunity. What kinds of theories keep the movement divided? From what direction do those theories come? And what, concretely, keeps the various alleged "right opportunists" from uniting, if they do in fact preach conciliationism? What broke up the so-called "Revolutionary Wing," or prevents its ex-members from uniting? What theories divide the WC's

"Leninist trend" from the "Revolutionary Wing," or the MLOC's "revolutionary trend" from PRRWO's "genuine trend"

Many comrades of the "Left-Wing have explicitly or implicitly reversed the causal order of disunity and amateurishness. The Workers Congress (M-L), which has put the struggle against amateurishness at the center of its agenda, states the "Left" case most forcefully.

"Secondly, our Economists complain on end about the sectarianism of our movement, that we lefts are intolerant, and thus we are constantly splintering and dividing the movement. To this we ask our comrades to turn to Lenin:

"The principal feature of our movement, which has become particularly marked in recent times, is its state of disunity and its amateur character."
[Lenin, **CW 4**, p. 352]

"He re-emphasizes this point in "Our Immediate Task ": "All that is now lacking is the unification of all this local work into the work of a single party. Our chief drawback to the overcoming of which we must devote all our energy is the narrow amateurish character of our local work." (**CW 4**, p. 216)

"Our Economists would do well to listen to Lenin and begin paying attention to the amateurishness that affects us all. Lenin explains that the **SOURCE** of disunity in our movement which is still in its infancy--is its fragmented, locally limited and narrowly practical character. Our movement reflects all the inevitable characteristics of the spontaneous workers' movement. We can overcome this disunity, but not by crying about sectarianism. Only by the conscious effort to link socialism to the working class movement, by winning the vanguard to communism, can we overcome this obstacle. Our answer to the Economists is the same as Lenin's: "...yes, our movement is indeed in its infancy, and in order that it may grow up the more quickly, it must become infected with intolerance against those who retard its growth by their subservience to spontaneity." [WITBD?, p. 51] (WC[M-L], **The Communist**, I, No. 7, p. 7)

This passage exemplifies certain "left" dogmatist trains of thought within our movement. It runs: our movement is in its infancy; Lenin wrote about a movement in its infancy. Lenin described his infant movement as characterized principally by amateurishness and disunity. Disunity and amateurishness feature prominently in our movement as well. Lenin called for the overcoming of the narrow amateurish character of our local work; therefore, amateurishness is the source of disunity. This conclusion does not

follow at all, mainly because the WC(M-L) comrades have skipped a whole series of prior questions upon which any demonstration must rest. Did Lenin face **the same kind of disunity and amateurishness** that we face, i.e., did it have an identical development and the same contributing causes? Or should we understand "disunity" and "amateurishness" as universal, Platonic ideals which float from period to period to do their nasty work? Any study of the articles quoted will show that Lenin most emphatically does not address the same kind of disunity and amateurishness which impede our movement. The **History of the CPSU(B)** says that "although the First Congress had been held, in reality no Marxist Social-Democratic party was as yet formed in Russia," (p. 18-19). But "Our Immediate Task" reads,

"The Party has not ceased to exist, it has only withdrawn into itself in order to gather strength and put the unification of all Russian Social-Democrats on a sound footing." (**CW 4**, p. 215)

The other article referred to by the WC argues,

"we Russian Social-Democrats must unite and direct all our efforts towards the formation of a strong party which must struggle under the single banner of revolutionary Social-Democracy. This is precisely the task laid down by the congress in 1898 at which the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party was formed, and which published its **Manifesto**.

"We regard ourselves as **members of this Party**; we agree entirely with the fundamental ideas contained in the Manifesto and attach extreme importance to it as a public declaration of its aims. Consequently, we, **as members of the Party**, present the question of our immediate and direct tasks as follows: What plan of activity must we adopt to revive the Party on the firmest possible basis?" (**CW 4**, p. 353; emphasis added)

Do the various Marxist-Leninist organizations and individuals in the U.S. consider themselves members of a common party? Do they subscribe to a single declaration of their aims? Most definitely not: they consider themselves members of one or another self-anointed party or party-to-be, or as the advocates of the true revolutionary trend. The truth of the WC's analogy falls on this point alone, and the other aspects can wait until the next chapter. Instead we are interested here in the significance of the causal relationship they see between amateurishness and disunity.

Either amateurishness causes disunity, as the WC believes, or disunity, justified mainly by "left" opportunism, perpetuates amateurishness. The reversal of this causal relationship carries potentially grave practical consequences for the development of the U.S. Marxist-Leninist forces. If

amateurishness lies at the source of disunity, then steps against amateurishness will automatically further the cause of real unity. In turn, the present unity (such as it exists) may perpetuate amateurishness. In this view, a plan to advance the struggle against amateurishness constitutes a principled line of demarcation between those favoring real unity and those favoring a false unity which papers over the causes of our division. **In other words, and regardless of the intentions of the comrades of the WC(M-L) and others, this logic provides a justification for the further splintering of the communist movement in the name of "ideal plans" and "all-embracing projects" for the eradication of amateurishness.** We do not suggest, because we do not have the facts to suggest, that this illogic led to the split of the BWC, but the implications of the WC argument remain.

History may repeat itself, but as Marx's famous quotation noted, it never marches quite the same way twice. "Lefts" who lie in ambush for the appearance of Russian Economism or Menshevism in the U.S. communist movement will have a long wait. Revisionism has an international scope, especially in an era where it exercises state power, but it manifests itself in particular countries and particular working class movements, where it reflects the ideological influence not only of the bourgeoisie "in general," but of a particular bourgeoisie.

Further, we do not think our "Left-wing" comrades know what they are waiting for. The small groups in Russia during the early 1900's did rely on revisionist arguments to protect their own small circle interests, and in that situation those arguments did form the main obstacle to the elimination of amateurishness. But Lenin makes clear that the small groups did not begin as revisionists (many in fact began as orthodox Marxists fighting the Narodniks), and only gravitated towards Economism. At the level of ideological and political line, the small groups fell into right opportunism.¹ However, at the organizational level, they "elevated their instinctive anarchism to a principle of struggle," (CW 7, p. 456) and advocated an "organizational anarchism," (CW 13, p. 110) i.e., "left" opportunism in matters of organization.

The zeal with which the "Left-Wing" scans the horizon in search of the Rightist main danger brings us to an additional factor which plays an important role in determining that danger. That factor is the history and target of the ideological struggle among the Marxist-Leninist forces.

Footnote

¹ Though even the Economism discussed in **What Is To Be Done?** had a "left" aspect. The Economists accused the Iskra-ists of " 'compromise' with liberalism by intervening in every 'liberal' issue...by devoting much attention to the students and even...to the Zemstovs!...in general wish[ing]to devote a greater percentage (compared with the Economists) of their efforts to activity among the non-proletarian classes of the population." (**WITBD?**, p. 97) In other words, the Economists held the Iskra-ists guilty of reformism or right opportunism. See also CW 23, p. 13, already cited, and CW 5, p. 445.