

Proletarian Unity League

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

### Chapter 3: "Left" Opportunism in Party-Building Line B. Evolutionism and Voluntarism in Party-Building

The "Left-Wing" literature on party-building habitually collapses distinctions between party-building, party formation, and the vanguard party, and for good reason. This confusion emerges most clearly when an organization wishes to prepare public opinion for yet another Founding Congress. For example, in discovering that "historical point" at which party-building had become the central task "for a brief period ahead," the Revolutionary Union identified party-building with party-formation, and party-formation with the objective existence of a communist vanguard:

"...**only now** has creating the new Party become the most pressing task because **only now** have the concrete conditions ripened sufficiently to make this task a practical possibility. Several years ago, and right up to this historical point, building the new party was not the main task because the young communist movement in this country had not accumulated enough practical experience in mass struggle, and also didn't have enough experience in applying Marxist-Leninist theory to summing up this experience in order to advance the mass movement." (**Revolution:** June 1974, p. 3)

"People like Loren and others who say that the central task all along was party-building are failing to take into account the actual development of the communist movement in this country in recent years, and failing to reckon with the actual stages of development that this movement had to go through to make possible the creation of a genuine vanguard Party." (**Ibid.**, May 1974, p. 8)

By merging party-formation and the vanguard party, the RU and other "left" groups can hide alternately behind the requirements of one or the other. The confusion serves sectarian interests and has a "left" inspiration. In the first instance, it allowed the RU to oppose both Marxist-Leninist unification and the necessary ideological struggle to bring it about behind the otherwise valid observation that the preconditions for forming a **vanguard** party did not exist. While Rightist in essence (opposing the advance of the movement because objective conditions have not matured), this objection takes a "left"

form. In fact, it borrows from the anarcho-syndicalist critique of political parties and hence party-building.

Anarcho-syndicalists have traditionally complained that the leadership and membership of working class political parties included too many petty bourgeois intellectuals and other non-proletarians. When the IWW leveled this same charge at the old Socialist Party, it was obviously true, but it mistook the part for the whole. The old Socialist Party did not have a reformist line basically because it had so many petty-bourgeois and even bourgeois members, though their weight in the party became an important contributing factor. Rather, the Socialist Party attracted populists, "municipal reformers" and other petty-bourgeois elements because it had a basically reformist line which subordinated the proletariat's interests to the interests of the petty-bourgeoisie. The error reflects the IWW's "left" economism, their exaggeration of the importance of the sociological composition of the membership and leadership in determining a political party's character.

"Chairman Mao teaches us that "the correctness or incorrectness of the ideological and political line decides everything."...If one's line is correct, even if one has not a single soldier at first, there will be soldiers, and even if there is no political power, political power will be gained." (Chou En-Lai, CPC 10th Congress)

In other words, if the line is correct, and we do not have much proletarian support we will get that too.

In the history of the U.S. Marxist movement, this anarcho-syndicalist critique reached a kind of high point with the formation of the Wage Workers Party, a short-lived, Northwest based split-off from the old Socialist Party. The WWP restricted its membership to bona fide proletarians, and its leader, Herman Titus, dutifully quit his medical practice and sought honest work. Interestingly enough, the WWP counted among its members W.Z. Foster, future leader of the CPUSA.<sup>1</sup>

The RU opposed Marxist-Leninist unification on theoretically similar grounds. Judging the communist movement according to an economist sociologism, they held that communist unification in a party or other form could not serve the proletariat's interests because the movement did not have enough workers, or enough experience among the real workers to have a "proletarian" line.<sup>2</sup> While making generally correct criticisms of the RU's line and policies, split-offs from the RU camp like the Communist Workers Organization/NYC<sup>3</sup> retained this syndicalist influence in their appraisal of the RU's party-building position. In a valuable paper entitled "A Party or a Sect?" they argued against the "party-building fetish" on the grounds that "the

leaders of the class must be tried and tested in the movement of a massive section of the class in close alliance with its revolutionary allies." To the extent that communist unification does not bring together the true leaders of the class as defined here, the organization which results would not deserve the name vanguard Party. But simply because the Marxist-Leninist forces do not today play that role is no reason to oppose uniting all those attempting to take and give leadership to the class vanguard, and in the process to rally the best elements of the working class to communism.

The syndicalist conception of party-building and of theory has also affect other Marxist-Leninist organizations who oppose the "left" line in the communist movement. The distinction the Philadelphia Workers Organizing Committee draws between "petit-bourgeois intellectuals' communism" and "workers' communism" implies that the communist theory produced by intellectuals will necessarily fall into opportunism, while that advanced by workers will necessarily constitute a correct line, (see **Guardian**, May 28, 1975) Until workers compose the overwhelming percentage of communist organizations, then, Marxist-Leninist unification could only take place around "petit-bourgeois intellectuals' communism," i.e., around an opportunist line. (We do not think the PWOC actually believes this, but this is the implication of their syndicalist-derived distinction.)

To groups like the Communist Workers Organization/NYC, as well as to the RU's many long-time "left" critics, such as the OL, the WVO, etc., the RU's discovery of the new "historical point" suggested the complete abandonment of its former stand on party-building. But, in fact, the old position foreshadowed the new position. **The immediate launching of a new Party represented the ideological complement, the logical outcome, of the RU's original semi-anarcho-syndicalist opposition to Marxist-Leninist unification.** The earlier "left" economist stand was **evolutionist**: "more" workers, "more" experience among real workers, "more 'workers' theory," etc. Like all evolutionist positions, its weakness lay (and, insofar it has been taken up by newer forces, continues to lie) in its inability to analyze the **necessary conditions for qualitative change**. How will Marxist-Leninist unity come about? Why are "more" workers necessary, and for what **exactly** are they necessary (in other words, what are the quantitative conditions for qualitative change?)

The anarcho-syndicalist source of this party-building line provides no answers. In theory, anarcho-syndicalism leads to the rejection of all political parties as "corrupt" and "petty-bourgeois." No political party will ever have authentic enough proletarian credentials for the anarcho-syndicalist, because politics itself is not "proletarian" enough. Since politics concerns the struggle for state power, and since any state power represents bourgeois authority

for the anarchist tradition, the parties organizing that struggle have already fallen under petit-bourgeois influence. Only the economic struggle of labor against capital truly interests the proletariat, and for that, parties are not necessary.

The RU (RCP) was not and is not anarcho-syndicalist; it takes Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Tse-tung-Thought as its guide to action. Despite the anarcho-syndicalist influence within its ranks, the RU believed in political parties. But its ideological and political framework did not provide a plan for realizing the qualitative leap to Marxist-Leninist unity embodied in a Party or other form. Therefore, it had to **create** this leap. Having failed to analyze the conditions necessary for Marxist-Leninist unity, it could not prepare or master them. The RU, therefore, tried to summon them into existence through an act of will. Since its evolutionist doctrine could not explain what would bring about that "historical point" at which "the concrete conditions had ripened sufficiently" to make party-formation "a practical possibility," it **declared** that that "historical point" had arrived. "We can form a party because we want one; we want to form a party because we need one." **Voluntarism** is the only solution, the only exit, open to evolutionism; the two invariably accompany each other.

### **Where There's a Will, There's a Way**

We have dealt with the RU's position at such length because their theoretical confusion over party-building, party-formation, and the vanguard Party has the best-known history, and because this confusion is symptomatic of the voluntarist party-building line. But, in fact, other major organizations, such as the October League and the Organizing Committee for a Marxist-Leninist Party, collapse the same distinctions and share the same basic perspective. The initial Organizing Committee statement says both that "All genuine Marxist-Leninists now recognize that the building of a new, anti-revisionist Marxist-Leninist party is our central and pressing task" and that "party-building has become a task of **immediacy**" ("Marxist-Leninists Unite!") As we explained above, party-building does constitute the central strategic task, and will until a vanguard exists. But since it is a complex process comprising many tasks, party-building itself cannot be the **immediate** task, no matter how **pressing** the need for a vanguard party. What the Organizing Committee comrades mean in fact is party formation ("all Marxist-Leninists must immediately unite in the effort to draft a communist party program with the aim of holding a founding Party Congress in the near future.") Yet they define the party they wish to form as the vanguard party itself:

"The new communist party **must be one** that can play its historical role of the conscious vanguard of the working class, applying the principles of Marxism-Leninism to the concrete conditions of the U.S. revolution."  
(Emphasis added)

And they claim that "the conditions exist for realizing this urgent task." In other words, following the Founding Congress, party-building will no longer constitute our principal strategic task; presumably, "building the fightback" or "building the struggle, class consciousness and revolutionary unity of the working class," as the RU (RCP) put it, will take its place.

These apparently minor confusions reveal the same theoretical difficulties as in the RU's case. The October League has never put forward an analysis of what "conditions" would permit the qualitative leap to Marxist-Leninist unification or a real vanguard party. Instead they have acted as if unity would emerge from the existing ideological struggles, practical activities, and, most of all, organizations, namely their own. But they say they want Marxist-Leninist unity: therefore, by an act of will, they have conjured into existence a "unity trend." They want, they declared, to unite the "twenty centers" in the anti-revisionist movement. (Chairman Klonsky's speech, **Class Struggle**, No. 3, Winter 1976). **But since they have never succeeded in analyzing the contradictions dividing those twenty centers, they cannot resolve those contradictions in favor of Marxist-Leninist unity and proletarian revolution.** Consequently they have set out to create **new** centers, centers which they can unite.<sup>4</sup> The OL wants the conditions permitting the formation of the Marxist-Leninist Party; therefore, they declare these "conditions" to be present. And finally, they want a vanguard party; so, "the new communist party **must be one** that can play its historical role of the conscious vanguard." But since the party the OL forms will not, despite their orders, actually play that role, they go on to give a definition of the vanguard which would fit just as well what Lenin called a "circle of theoreticians": "applying the principles of Marxism-Leninism to the concrete conditions of the U.S. revolution."

Confusing wishes with facts, the Organizing Committee describes the conscious vanguard solely in respect to "consciousness" and not to its **political reality**, its actual vanguard status in the life of our country. If the RU's confusion of the vanguard party and party-formation hindered the building of communist unity before the "historic point," then the Organizing Committee's nearly identical confusions will block communist unity after their Founding Congress. For if the vanguard party already exists, who is left to unite? None but the "handful of opportunists whose organizations have developed for the sole purpose of keeping the party from being built." (**The Call**, September 6, 1976)

A few more conceptual distinctions will not by themselves lead to a correct party building line. Our problems lie above all with a certain theory and **practice** of party-formation, not with a little terminology. The Communist Labor Party, for example, admits that it is not the vanguard and in terms which bear repeating:

"The CLP is **not** the 'vanguard party'. Why? Because the vanguard is an **objective** and not a subjective concept. The 'vanguard of the proletariat' is just that--the millions of men and women in every factory, office, neighborhood, school, etc., who take the lead and daily fight against oppression in the limited ways available to them. When these bravest sons and daughters of the working class are won to the cause of communism, educated in the science of Marxism-Leninism and trained in democratic centralism--that will be the vanguard party. In short, having the 'best theory' and the 'best organization' does not make the 'vanguard'--that is mere subjectivism." (**Democratic Lawyer**, No. 2, CLP fraction in the National Lawyers Guild)

Of course, fine words like these count for little if a party nevertheless concludes that the principal strategic task has, with its founding, become building the anti-fascist united front from below; if it does not recognize, in word and deed, the existence of other genuine Marxist-Leninist organizations, and bend every effort to unite with them on a basis of Marxist-Leninist principle; if, in short, it gives itself the airs of a vanguard party even while denouncing the pretension.

Though we have no vanguard party, there do exist three or four factionalist parties, each claiming it alone represents the **interests** of the class vanguard, and that it alone can function as the guiding nucleus for the construction of a full-fledged Communist Party. **Yet the very multiplication of these parties indicates that none has successfully analyzed the conditions necessary for Marxist-Leninist unity, and therefore none has successfully united all forces dedicated to the communist cause.** And precisely because of the profusion of parties, each reserving for itself the mantle of "party of the working class," if not vanguard of the proletariat, the prospects for uniting Marxist-Leninists into a single party and actually building a powerful communist presence in the workers' movement seem more remote today than they did only a few years ago.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Also worth noting is Foster's description of the WWP in his **History of the CPUSA** and **From Bryan to Stalin**. For reasons which deserve attention, Foster omits any discussion of the WWP's attitude towards Japanese and Chinese immigration to the Northwest. Yet "Comrade" Titus held that racial incompatibility was a fact and "no amount of Proletarian Solidarity or International Unity can ignore it. We must face facts." (quoted in Kipnis, **The American Socialist Movement**, p. 278)

<sup>2</sup> And, of course, after the vanguard Revolutionary Communist Party came into existence it found no more genuine Marxist-Leninist organizations to unite.

<sup>3</sup> The CWO/NYC has since changed its name to the Trade Union Educational Alliance, apparently after the Trade Union Educational League, the trade union organization led by William Z. Foster during the 1920's.

<sup>4</sup>We have no doubt that these "recently formed" collectives, composed in good part of long-time OL supporters, previously unorganized individuals sympathetic to the OL, OL members themselves, and a small percentage of former leaders of established organizations will one day number twenty. But the real contradictions in the communist movement will not have changed.