

Proletarian Unity League

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

Chapter 3: "Left" Opportunism in Party-Building Line G. The "Iskra Principle" or...

"If this is party-building, we must need Iskra."

In searching for a means to bring about unity in the communist movement, some comrades, most notably the Workers Congress (M-L), have come forward with what they term the "Iskra Principle." According to them, the **Iskra** principle forms the "ideological foundation for our struggle to unite the Marxist-Leninist trend of our movement," and "the chief means to implement the ISKRA principle at this time is an ISKRA type newspaper." (**The Communist**, Vol. I, No. 10, supplement, p. 7) They and others have launched the slogan "build a new Iskra," claiming that "the failure to produce communist propaganda through an organ of the ISKRA-type is a reflection of right opportunism." (**Ibid.**, Vol. I, No. 7, p. 6) In our view, the seizure upon the **Iskra** experience and its elevation to a principle reflects a dogmatic misunderstanding of Bolshevik history; moreover, it ignores the concrete realities of the present period in the U.S.

Of the three patterns of party-formation discussed above, the "fusionist" experiences concern us most immediately (certainly, no major anti-revisionist split-off appears imminent in the CPUSA). **Iskra** was the newspaper of Lenin's anti-Economist tendency in the early Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party. In giving so much emphasis to a particular "fusionist" case, the discoverers of the "**Iskra** principle" have chosen correctly. But it remains to be seen what gives the **Iskra** experience the status of a principle.

The Workers Congress (M-L) has endowed the "**Iskra** principle" with four "basic points."

- 1) the necessity to put Marxist-Leninist ideology in command;
- 2) the necessity to develop an independent communist policy;
- 3) the necessity to consolidate line in the material unity of communist organization;
- 4) the necessity for communist methods of leadership, which unites with the

advanced and relies on them to win over the broad masses of workers. (**The Communist**, vol. 1, no. 10, p. 2)

As "basic points" go, these are not bad. But we fail to see what they have to do with the **Iskra** experience. The phrasing of points 1) and 4) come from Mao, and the Chinese Party can be said to have carried out all four, yet no Iskra-type organ figures in their pre-party history. Point 3) is true enough, but **Iskra** precisely concerned itself with elaborating a unified line; the consolidation "in the material unity of communist organization" awaited the RSDLP Second Congress. No matter how correct taken separately, these "basic points" do not prove the case for an "**Iskra** principle" much less for the proposition that "the chief means to implement the ISKRA principle at this time is an ISKRA type newspaper," Further, these "points" allow for all sorts of interpretations, none of which necessarily leads to the practical conclusion the comrades of the Workers Congress have in mind. For example, the Party Building Committee (M-L) has declared it "firmly subscribes to the theoretical, tactical and organizational view, standpoint and method of the ISKRA principle that is embodied in **The Communist**." (From an article in **The Communist**). Now classes have standpoints, philosophies have methods, and organizations have "theoretical, tactical and organizational views," but a principle, regardless of its correctness, does not have all these kinds of things. What the Party Building Committee calls the **Iskra** principle amounts to something like either dialectical materialism or an organization's general line as a whole. And the WC comrades, who in every other instance attempt to clear up misconceptions about the **Iskra** principle, did not attempt to educate these supporters about their erroneous views.

If "the failure to produce communist propaganda through an organ of the **Iskra**-type is a reflection of right opportunism," then the Workers Congress promises some mind-boggling reinterpretations of communist history. For what are to make of a "principle" which figures exactly **once** in the entire history of the international communist movement? That the "split-off" or "pre-party organisation" experiences ignored the **Iskra** principle is one thing; but that no newspaper performs the **Iskra** function in any other "fusionist" experience as well? Why didn't the Third International alert the Albanians, or the Koreans, or others, to this "right opportunist" deviation?

Before we dismiss every other party-building experience, we might look at how the Bolsheviks themselves saw **Iskra**. In a section of **Foundations of Leninism** entitled "tactical leadership," Stalin writes,

In the period of the formation of the Party, when the innumerable circles and organizations had not yet been linked together, when amateurishness and

the parochial outlook of the circles were corroding the Party from top to bottom, when ideological confusion was the characteristic feature of the internal life of the Party, the main link and the main task in the chain of links and in the chain of tasks then confronting the Party proved to be the establishment of an all-Russian illegal newspaper (*Iskra*).

In other words, **Iskra** represented a specific tactic adapted to the concrete conditions of the Social-Democratic movement of that time, and not a "principle." Lenin even contrasted this "practical solution" to a "solution in principle" (see "Where to Begin"). In determining whether or not a new **Iskra** heads up the orders of the day, we need to ask whether the conditions of our communist movement correspond to those of the Russian movement in 1901. Those advocating the **Iskra** model, and generally arguing that right opportunism constitutes the main danger, claim that they do; we believe that they do not.

True, "amateurishness and the parochial outlook" of the groups are "corroding" the movement from top to bottom. As we saw in Chapter Two, however, parochialism and group spirit do not necessarily imply Right opportunism. The Russian circles fell increasingly under the influence of Economism in the pre-**Iskra** period--"diving into the fray," restricting the proletarian struggle to economic issues, and tailing the political initiatives of the liberal bourgeoisie--but the different communist groups in Albania (where "group spirit" was equally if not more corrosive) had a pronounced tendency to withdraw from political work among the masses altogether. At one point the Comintern even advised that all Albanian cells dissolve and reconstitute themselves after having established deep ties with the masses (**History of the Party of Labor of Albania**, p. 52). And in the early Korean communist movement, which, according to Comintern leader Otto Kuusinen, outdid even the Americans for factionalism, "left" adventurist lines promoted the sectarian interests of the factions.

The disunity in the U.S. movement also differs from that of the pre-*Iskra* period in a number of important respects. The Economist groups of Lenin's day confined most of their work to serving the workers' economic struggles. Rather than waging ideological struggle against the spontaneous trade-unionist ideology of the workers, they took it over as their own. In the political sphere, the Economists put forward no independent proletarian solution to the bourgeois democratic tasks facing Russia. Instead they supported the liberal bourgeois solutions to these problems. Though formally united in a single Party and bound by a common **Manifesto**, the groups had "scarcely any connection" among them. Circles would arise ignorant of other groups in their own cities; all found it difficult to communicate with one another. Naturally the Economist groups saw no reason for establishing

organic connections between the separate groups in order to wage political struggle at the national level. After all, the liberal bourgeoisie already did so.

Can we say that "scarcely any connections" exist between the separate Marxist-Leninist circles and groups in our movement? Not really: we have several countrywide groupings which believe they have sufficient "connections" to form parties, numerous organizations with members in several cities, and bookstores which, depending on the sympathies of their owners, carry many groups' literature. Our groups do not confine their work to servicing the workers' economic struggles; they expend enormous energy preserving their separate existences in the "heat" of inter-group struggle. They can easily communicate with one another, but frequently refuse to, on the grounds of their opponents' "opportunism." And they do not find organizational connection useless to their economic and political activity; they believe it a positive **threat** to the "purity" of their ideological and political positions.

Five, Ten, Fifteen Iskras?

If the problems differ, the solutions must as well. In a situation where no Social-Democratic group put forward consistent Marxist propaganda and agitation on national political questions--in which no Social-Democratic group even recognized the importance of such work--**Iskra** rose above the parochialism of the groups centered in a single locality. As Lenin's famous formulations have it, **Iskra** served simultaneously as a collective agitator, collective propagandist, and collective organizer, the "scaffolding" of the future Party. But our parochialism is simply not of the Russian kind. Though many groups disagree with the WC's "**Iskra** principle," they hold to something close to the **Iskra** tactic. There results a profusion of would-be **Iskras**, at least a dozen of them. The WC may question how well they fulfill the "**Iskra** principle," but there is no doubt that each has its "independent communist policy," that many see themselves as the scaffolding of a future organization or Party, and that each tries to address events at the national level. At the same time, none acts as more than the voice of a single group or narrowly-based tendency.

In this situation, another paper attempting to carry out all three of **Iskra's** functions--agitator, propagandist, organizer--will not make any qualitative difference. It may succeed in uniting some of the small, unaffiliated local collectives and circles. It certainly can provide a central focus to a group's propaganda, agitational and organizational work among politically active workers. But it will not substantially affect the major divisions in the communist movement, and those divisions in turn limit its effectiveness among the small, unaffiliated groups and the working class.

After all, the dozen or so other would-be **Iskras** are also trying to consolidate those same circles, and those same politically active workers. By themselves, more **Iskras** will increase the anarchic competition among separate communist groups rather than reduce it.

The same factors which made **Iskra** so valuable in Russia account for its limitations in the U.S. The various newspapers in the U.S. movement concern themselves mainly with propagating the groups' "independent communist policies," policies worked out through an application of Marxism-Leninism. Resolving the differences among all those policies and overcoming the disunity of the Marxist-Leninists requires giving considerable space to the general theory of Marxism-Leninism and its application to U.S. conditions. It also requires the promotion of broad discussion, allowing freedom for criticism and counter-criticism. A newspaper is not best suited to these needs. A periodical published frequently enough to serve as a real collective organizer, topical enough to serve as a real collective agitator, and "applied" enough to serve as a real collective propagandist cannot devote the space necessary to difficult theoretical questions. Nor can it give the room required for the full exposure of theoretical differences, allowing each side to develop the implications of its positions. Theoretical work and the thrashing out of major differences cannot keep to a weekly, bi-weekly, or at this point probably even a monthly schedule. But a newspaper which does not keep to that schedule ceases to be a collective organizer.

No one denies that propaganda and agitation form an integral part of any communist's activity, and certainly a newspaper provides one means for carrying out this work on a consistent basis. Newspapers will continue to play a role in forging unity between the workers' movement and Marxism-Leninism. But they have only a secondary value in clearing up differences and building unity among the Marxist-Leninist forces themselves. To claim otherwise--to think that newspapers can play the key role in overcoming the unprincipled polarization of the communist movement--downplays the depth of the divisions among Marxist-Leninists, and the crippling effects those divisions have on communist work among the working class. At worst, it continues the sectarian illusion that a single, small group will by itself manage to recruit the proletarian vanguard, and by rallying the vanguard, emerge as the "main core" or center of the communist movement.¹

That said, we do not believe in ignoring the many newspapers or self-proclaimed **Iskras** that now exist. They can make important contributions to building unity among the communist forces IF their publishers recognize the way in which the group spirit threatens the very life of our movement. To "establish" unity among Russian Social-Democrats, Lenin called for a "common party literature" which united "all available literary forces,"

expressing "all shades of opinion and views prevailing among Russian Social-Democrats." (**LCW 4**, p. 323) Our newspapers can help bring about a common party literature if they conduct themselves in this spirit. Each of the present newspapers should turn over a regular percentage (on a similar matter, Lenin suggested a fourth) of their column inches to their positions **and that of other groups** on the common issues which divide Marxist-Leninists. In an earlier phase, the papers of some of the largest tendencies occasionally printed a polemic directed against themselves, and replied to it (the RU published some BWC and PRRWO exchanges; the CL included OL's first attack on them). Today, no opposing positions cross the pages of our parties' publications.² This fact, plus the miserably thin content of most papers' letter columns, reflects as perhaps no other single index does, the sectarian wasteland into which the ideological struggle of so much of the communist movement has retreated.

Footnotes

¹ This was the explicit position of some of the founders of the Workers Congress (Marxist-Leninist). In "The Crisis in the Black Workers Congress: Leninism or Petty Bourgeois Democracy," which the author claims "represents the views and ideas of all the genuine lefts in the BWC" (see preface; the lefts split off and formed the Workers Congress), Don Williams writes,

"The trend that is successful in accomplishing the task of winning the vanguard, the trend which focuses its attention on bringing socialist consciousness to the proletariat, will be the trend that gains hegemony and successfully unites the various communist forces into one party." (p. 36)

As we have indicated, a relationship exists between this familiar perspective on uniting the communist movement--my-group-will-prove-its-line-in-practice-by-winning-the-workers--and the popularity of the Iskra tactic, if not the "Iskra principle."

² For their part, the comrades of the WC(M-L) have made an attempt to solicit articles from other groups, which indicates the seriousness of the WC's commitment to an Iskra-like newspaper. But our general assessment of the "Iskra principle" remains.