

Proletarian Unity League

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

Chapter 5: The Social and Ideological Roots of "Left" Opportunism C. The Social Roots of "Left" Opportunism

If the social base for the economist line which dominated the Communist Parties in the 'fifties and 'sixties lay in the labor aristocracy, its material support rested on the spontaneous economic struggle. Following old-line Economism, modern revisionism conducted the ideological and political struggle as a more or less passive reflection of the economic struggle. Insofar as it recognized the independent political and ideological role of the proletariat, it restricted this role to the fight for democratic reform.

What class or class fraction would this deviation first move on a mass scale? In conditions of relatively stable capitalist development and "peaceful" class struggle, the economist deviation did not immediately stir the masses of working class Party members, or the proletarian masses themselves. Engaged in the daily economic struggle, the working class depends on its political and ideological organization outside the economic level to guide it in those battles and combat the trade-unionist ideologies continually produced there. Where that independent political and ideological direction faltered or was absent, the proletarian masses would tend to fall under the influence of the economist deviation. The identification made by the Communist Parties of democratic with socialist struggles, and increasingly, of democratic with socialist ideology, meant that the working class had lost its one weapon against bourgeois trade-unionist ideology.

The extreme minority character of the anti-revisionist split-offs from the Communist Parties in many imperialist countries, including the U.S., bears out this general analysis. Aside from a relatively small section of Party members, the working class masses were not engaged in the organized struggle against revisionism. Many of the working class members simply quit the Party in disgust at its bureaucratic reformism, "voting with their feet" against revisionism. In general, however, in those countries where the masses adhered to the modern revisionist parties, for the most part they continued to do so; where, as in the United States, they owed their allegiance more to bourgeois reformism than to the modern revisionist party, they also failed to flock to the fledgling Marxist-Leninist organizations. Though the first groups of anti-revisionists here and in a number of other countries came mainly from working class ex-Party members, the first mass base of their movement did not develop among the proletariat.

That section of the population defined by its place in the ideological state apparatus—namely, students and intellectuals—first felt the effects of the economist deviation on a mass scale. Isolated from the collective economic struggle and by its class instincts spontaneously contemptuous of it, the intelligentsia would not immediately respond to appeals to fight attacks on the masses' standard of living. And it is precisely among the intelligentsia that anti-revisionism first gained a responsive echo.

The 1960's and especially the late 'sixties saw an international crisis of bourgeois ideology and, as both contributing cause and effect, an international ideological revolt of students and a fraction of intellectuals. This ideological revolt directed itself against the bourgeois state machine for the reproduction

of bourgeois ideology—particularly the educational apparatus. Because the modern revisionist parties reduced revolution to the infinite accumulation of reforms; reduced the ideological and political struggle to the economic; reduced socialist to democratic ideology; and abandoned the struggle to smash, not only the bourgeois repressive apparatus, but also the bourgeois educational apparatus, in favor of reforming them, of "democratizing" the bourgeois state machine—for all these reasons, the revisionist parties were not prepared for the bourgeois ideological crisis, could not offer ideological leadership to the rebellious students and intellectuals, and, in the face of a massive **revolt**, preached reform. As a consequence of this betrayal, a new leadership had to arise. In the great student rebellions in England, in the France of May '68, in the Italy of '69, in Japan and the U.S., the revisionists did not play a leading role. (Afterwards, when the struggle had died down and the bankruptcy of various ultra-left leaderships became apparent, the revisionists did manage to make something of a comeback through the large student organizations in some of these countries.)

In the U.S., the failure of the non-violent civil rights movement to set Black people "Free by '63," coupled with brutal repression in the Deep South provoked a crisis of leadership in the Black movement. Led by SNCC and the example of Malcolm X, a revolutionary Black nationalist current rejected both the old-line traditional Black leadership and the more militant but essentially reformist and pacifist organizations like SCLC. Acting as no more than an echo of the reformist current in the Black movement, the modern revisionist Party had no important part in the revolutionary nationalist upsurge among Afro-Americans or later among other national movements. Fifteen years of betrayal of the most militant forces and struggles of the Black movement had shorn the CPUSA of its one-time title, "Party of the Negro People." SNCC, not the revisionists, grasped the revolutionary potential of the Black masses, and synthesized it in its forthright opposition to the war in Vietnam and its rallying cry, "Black Power."

The white student movement and the organized anti-war movement underwent a similar and closely related internal struggle. Responding to the new directions set by SNCC and to the fresh victories won by the Vietnamese, SDS began to shed its anti-communist social-democratic heritage and align itself with the worldwide struggle against U.S. imperialism. Where the modern revisionists spoke of peace and negotiation in Vietnam, the anti-imperialist elements in SDS called for victory to the NLF. Nor could the CPUSA respond to the ideological crisis affecting students and intellectuals, except at the very beginning in struggles like the Free Speech movement. In an otherwise muddled article, Fred Gordon, SDS National Education Secretary at the time of the split, points to the lack of influence which the revisionists exercised among this stratum:

"The second reason for its [SDS] rapid growth was that it grew at a time when a powerful vacuum had developed in radical politics. The collapse into irrelevancy of the Communist Party, around which radical opposition to the system tended to gravitate, had the effect of closing down discussion of radical opposition generally... The **need** for radical opposition, however, of a different sort than the Communist Party represented, still existed and was growing." ("A Class Analysis of the Radical Student Movement")

The vacuum that Gordon describes existed above all for radicalized students and intellectuals, both oppressed nationality and white, and from the organizations of this strata came many leaders of the new Marxist-Leninist groups— from SNCC, the Northern Student Movement, the May 2nd Movement, SDS, SOBU/YOBU, MECHA, from organizations like the Congress of Afrikan People, and from early women's groups. Students and intellectuals

also played important roles in organizations like the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the Young Lords Party, I Wor Kuen and others.

A "Left-Wing" Communism "...introduced by people of petit-bourgeois origins"

The social basis of our own "Left-Wing" Communism differentiates it from some of the ultra-left trends encountered in the history of the workers' movement. That difference in turn implies differences in the form which the "Left" line takes here and in its strength within the communist movement.

Anarchism has historically had the most influence in the economically backward countries of Europe. Its base lay in the artisanal class. For example, the Jura Federation, the backbone of the Bakuninist movement in the 1860's and 1870's, was made up of watchmakers from small Swiss villages, who lived through farming and their craft. The anarcho-syndicalism of the last century also grew up in the Latin countries of Europe. Except for Spain, it did not survive the developing industrialization of those countries, social chauvinist betrayal by the anarcho-syndicalist leaders during World War I (a betrayal which mirrored that of the Second International), and the example of the October Revolution. But within the artisanal class of the last century, and within that section of the proletariat newly forced out of that class (and to some extent the peasantry proper), anarchist influence was real and persistent. Faced with its approaching ruin, the spontaneous petit-bourgeois class instincts of the artisans, particularly the peasant artisans, gravitated to the anarchist vision of federated, property-holding communities.

The "Left-Wing" Communism of Lenin's time, on the other hand, drew its strength from the basic proletariat.

"In a number of countries anti-parliamentarianism is to be seen, which has not been so much introduced by people of petit-bourgeois origin as fostered by certain advanced contingents of the proletariat out of hatred for the old parliamentarianism, out of a legitimate, proper and necessary hatred for the conduct of members of parliament in Britain, France, Italy, in all lands." (CW 31, P. 231)

If the class instincts of the peasant artisans favored the growth of anarchism, then the class instincts of the workers sympathetic to boycotting parliament and the reactionary-led trade unions favored the uprooting of the "Left-Wing" deviation within communism. Faced with this particularity of the ultra-left deviation, Lenin could write:

"The mistake of Left doctrinairism in communism is at present a thousand times less dangerous and less significant than that of Right doctrinairism...but after all, that is only due to the fact that Left communism is a very young trend, is only just coming into being. It is only for this reason that, under certain conditions, the disease can be easily eradicated, and we must set to work with the utmost energy to eradicate it." (*Ibid.*, p. 103)

Although the workers' proletarian instincts favored the correction of their "left" errors, only because of its immaturity did Lenin consider ultra-leftism such a relatively minor, easily corrected danger.

The U.S. communist movement rests at the present time mainly on the revolutionary students and intellectuals. Unlike the mistakes Lenin combatted in 1920, our movement's mistakes are not those of the revolutionary class vanguard; they are the mistakes of revolutionary ideologists. The struggle against the "left" danger therefore cannot appeal to

the sound proletarian class instincts of most of those attracted by the "left" line. On the contrary, it must contend with the spontaneous class instincts of the intelligentsia. These instincts give particular characteristics to the "left" line. They also mean that fighting the "left" line will be that much more difficult, until the class nature of the communist forces changes.

Just as the historical roots of "left" opportunism involve its social roots as well, so its social roots lead us to its ideological roots. Earlier, we said that the ideological source of the "left" line lay in the anarchist tradition. Given that this tradition cannot exist abstracted from those who take it up, their spontaneous class ideologies in turn form part of the ideological foundation of contemporary ultra-leftism. That today our communist movement typically rails against spontaneous trade-unionist ideology yet never treats the spontaneous ideology of the intelligentsia provides the best demonstration of how important this foundation is.