

Proletarian Unity League

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

Chapter 2: The Danger from the "Left"

Concrete analysis of the U.S. communist movement will prove that the main danger threatening it at this time comes from the "Left." From their common source in semi-anarchist ideology flows a stream of errors characteristic of our movement: subjectivism, adventurism, revolutionary phrase-mongering, dogmatism, sectarianism, arrogant intransigence, and "left" economism. Among these errors, "left" sectarianism today plays the most important role. "Left" sectarianism is the main danger to the Marxist-Leninist forces.

In order to establish this thesis, we first need to define the concept of the main danger.

We define the main danger as the chief obstacle to decisive advances on our current tasks.

As indicated in Chapter I, the main danger within the communist Party or movement may change several times in the course of the same **strategic stage**. These changes correspond to changes in the current tasks of communists. To return to the example of the RSDLP, we saw there that the main danger within the emerging Russian Social-Democratic movement shifted within the first strategic stage of party-building, a stage which ended in 1905. In the first period within that stage, the Social-Democrats concentrated on the diffusion of Marxism among the revolutionary intelligentsia and politically active workers. In the face of this immediate task, the Right and the ultra-left of the revolutionary movement took different positions. The Right, represented by elements around Plekhanov, agreed on the necessity of propagating Marxism, even if theirs was a gradualist Marxism. The ultra-left, represented by the Narodniks, based their terrorist activity on a populist and explicitly anti-Marxist analysis of Russia. They opposed the spread of Marxism and advocated "stirring up" the masses through populist agitation. Consequently, the Narodniks and Narodnik-inspired views posed the main danger to the Russian Social-Democrats.

The current tasks of Social-Democrats changed in the beginning of the second period analyzed by Lenin, but the main danger did not. At that time, Marxism had won a victory over the Narodniks and gained considerable numbers of advanced workers to its cause. It consolidated both victories in the new organizations, the Leagues of Struggle. The Social-Democrats set out to deepen their fusion with the emerging working class movement, and passed over to agitational work as the main form of activity to accomplish it. Again, the Right and the ultra-left took different positions on this task. The Right agreed on the importance of widespread agitation, in fact overemphasizing economic agitation to the exclusion of other work. But Narodnik-inspired views displayed contempt for this type of daily practical activity. The "Lefts" clung to the conspiratorial circles and argued against the more hazardous work of going among the masses of the working class.¹ So though its influence had diminished, the "Left" still posed the main danger to the revolutionary forces.

The transition from the second to the third period saw new current tasks and a new main danger. Too exclusive a concentration on economic agitation and organization coupled with the exile or imprisonment of its seasoned leadership had plunged the Social-Democratic movement into organizational and ideological disarray. The Marxists faced the task of constructing a national Party organization for the waging of revolutionary political struggle. Lenin proposed the founding of an all-Russian political newspaper, and the steady expansion of its organization, as the surest road to a reunited Party. Now it was basically the Right, represented by the Economists, the "Russian Bernsteins," who sought to prevent the Social-Democrats from taking up their new immediate tasks. For the fight against the ultra-left in the previous two periods had inevitably strengthened the Right. The narrow propaganda circles of the first period had produced a reaction toward narrow agitational work. The Narodniks' restriction of political struggle to terrorism impelled some Social-Democrats towards an equally narrow rejection of politics altogether. Lastly, the fight against the Narodniks' reliance upon conspiratorial organization alone to lead the people's struggle created favorable conditions for the Rights' attack on the need for any strong revolutionary organization at all. With new current tasks on the agenda, the Right rose to become the new main danger.

Abstract logic could not settle the question of the main danger within the Russian Social-Democratic movement in any given period. Only an analysis of the immediate needs of that movement, and the tasks before it, enabled Lenin and his followers to make out the main enemy in the way of the speediest attainment of their objectives. To assess the strength and importance of different tendencies within the U.S. communist movement, we need to sketch out our immediate tasks.

The main features of the U.S. working class movement at this time are as follows: the complete absence of any broad revolutionary movement; the consequently unchallenged hegemony of bourgeois ideology and bourgeois politics over the proletariat, reflected in a weak and nationally-divided labor movement; and the isolation of tiny groups of communists from the working class. Disorganization, localism, and amateurishness in every aspect of revolutionary work characterize the small communist forces. We can summarize the current tasks falling to the communists, then, as the overcoming of our disorganization and isolation. In other words, to quote from the Comintern passage used as an epigraph to this book, "creating a [single] communist nucleus and connecting it with the working mass." To this end, the Marxist-Leninists have to take up propaganda work as their main form of activity: the study and application of theory, and its propagation among the politically advanced workers, in order to establish the ideological foundations for communist unification.

We distinguish overcoming our disorganization and isolation from the main strategic party-building task. As defined in the last chapter, the main strategic party building task consists in clearing away the chief obstacle to decisive advances on our current tasks. By decisive advances, we mean that the communist movement would have taken its first step towards the working class, that it would include enough vanguard elements familiar with every aspect of working class life that it could pass to widespread agitation as the main form of activity. These advances therefore presuppose the accomplishment of subordinate theoretical, propaganda and agitational tasks.²

As with the Russian Social-Democratic movement before the turn of the century the shortcomings of the U.S. communist forces stem in the first place from objective causes. An immature Marxist-Leninist movement largely spawned among the revolutionary students and intellectuals would almost naturally begin disorganized and at least somewhat isolated from the working class. What made the Economists the main danger to the Russian Social-Democrats was that they **defended** the primitiveness of the Russian movement, elevated it to a "special theory," and opposed taking up the means for resolving it (the all-Russian political newspaper as the means to the Party). Similarly, our own chief obstacle lies in that tendency which defends or justifies, and thereby perpetuates, our disorganization and isolation. That tendency constitutes the main danger which sanctions or excuses Marxist-Leninist thought **not** "working mainly in one direction" and hence the Marxist-Leninists **not** taking firm strides towards the workers' movement.

For a number of years, an intense two-line struggle has gone on in the communist movement over just which tendency represents this danger. The dominant view believes Right opportunism stands as the chief obstacle before the Marxist-Leninists. According to this analysis, the struggle against Rightism, particularly Right opportunism in political line, will pave the way (or has already paved the way) for the unity of genuine Marxist-Leninists and for their sinking deep roots in the workers' movement. A minority position has instead argued that "left" opportunism, particularly "left" opportunism in party-building line, is mainly responsible for holding back the communist movement. The struggle between these two lines ranges over not only the main danger, but also extends to the current situation and our immediate tasks.

A good number of sincere Marxist-Leninists and other revolutionary-minded workers and intellectuals question the relevance of this entire debate. They wonder what difference it really makes whether Right opportunism or "left" opportunism poses the principal threat to our movement. After all, it is clear enough that we have many problems, and some of them come from the "Left" and some from the Right, and some seem to come from both at once. Why split hairs, they reason; let us combat a few more errors and worry less about labeling them.

But the stakes in the debate over the main danger are eminently practical and political. Dialectical materialism holds that at every stage in the development of a process, there is only one principal contradiction. The principal contradiction plays the leading role in the development of the process at that stage. How we identify that contradiction, then, determines the analysis we will make of our work, the consequences we foresee if this deviation is persisted in, and the historical tradition it belongs to. Above all, the analysis of the main danger decides the **methods of correction** we will employ to rid our work of its present shortcomings. Far from remedying errors, the wrong analysis of the main danger will necessarily strengthen them. If the gang chasing you is coming from the Left, but you think they're coming from the Right, and so head Left to avoid them, that has very practical consequences, consequences not likely to improve your situation. The pamphlet **What are 'Left' and Right Errors?** cites the historical precedent of the Chinese Party in the early 1930's.

The Chinese Party suffered disaster before the Long March because it failed to correct a "Left" line. It believed a line which in reality was "Left" was "Rightist," so in trying to correct the mistakes of that line mowed even further "Left."

The Chinese Party considers the Li Li-san line, which in the late 1920's

proposed "immediate armed insurrections in all parts of the country," a "Left" adventurist policy. Yet shortly after Li Li-san had been defeated, others criticized Li Li-san's line as "Rightist"! Their views won out for several years, as a result of which the Party lost ninety percent of its members, (p. 11-12; see Mao's description in SW I, p. 249-50.)

We think something very similar, though far less costly, has happened in the U.S. communist movement. Ultra-leftism has strengthened itself through a critique of certain lines as right opportunist, when in fact they had a mainly "left" character. The confusion of anarcho-syndicalist influence with Right Economism has produced an even more extreme swing to the "Left," under the signboard of struggle against Rightism (for example, the characterization of the Revolutionary Union/Revolutionary Communist Party as a basically right opportunist organization.) To expose the faulty premises of the "Lefts'" campaign against Rightism, we will begin by reviewing some recent history of the communist movement. Through that review we can look at how the dominant trend in our movement understands the current situation and our tasks.

Endnotes

¹This conspiratorial tendency dovetailed with a secondary, Rightist conservatism among some of the better-off workers in the propaganda circles. They saw the education they received in the circles as a means to cultural and social advancement and opposed practical activity among the frequently illiterate, less skilled masses. For a very bourgeois account, see Haimson, **The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism, esp. p. 71.**

²In the terms of dialectical materialism, decisive advances imply the resolution of the principal contradiction. This contradiction does not disappear (i.e., the same theoretical, propaganda, and organizational tasks continue into the new phase), but a new principal contradiction arises to displace it (those tasks no longer occupy the foreground of all communist activity).