

Proletarian Unity League

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

### Chapter 4: "Left" Opportunism in Political Line

We have argued that the main danger to the communist movement comes from the "left," not the Right. So far, we have concentrated on "left" opportunism in party-building line, or "left" sectarianism, which we regard as the immediate danger in the present strategic period. But the danger from the "Left" does not simply stem from "left" sectarianism. As the "left"-ward drift of the movement has evolved into a full-blown trend, "left" errors in political line have become more pronounced and increasingly dangerous. Adventurism, "left" sectarianism and "left" economism in political line join adventurism and "left" sectarianism in party-building line. Together they mark the "maturity" of petit-bourgeois revolutionism.

Just as a revolutionary line bases itself in proletarian ideology, so deviations result from the influence of bourgeois ideology. Errors at one or another level have some definite ideological inspiration. Insofar as this source is not exposed and rooted out in the struggle against deviations at one level, it is bound to have an effect, in the short-term or the long, on the line pursued at another level. It will necessarily express itself in other features of a revolutionary organization's (or a revolutionary individual's) overall line.

A given error may represent a correctable deviation from a revolutionary line--a line basically grounded in proletarian ideology--or the emergence of a definite revisionist trend--a line basically grounded in bourgeois ideology. In other words, some people march the wrong way because they have lost their bearings, and some because they have the wrong goal. Only a principled ideological struggle will allow us to differentiate one from the other.

"And there is no reason to be so much afraid of a struggle: a struggle may cause annoyance to some **individuals**, but it will clear the air, define attitudes in a precise and straightforward manner, define which differences are important and which unimportant, define where people stand--those who are taking a completely different path and those Party comrades who differ only on minor points...Without a struggle, however, how is one to distinguish these minor mistakes from the **trend** which stands clearly revealed in **Rabochaya Mysl**...Without struggle there cannot be a sorting out, and

without a sorting out there cannot be any successful advance, nor can there be any lasting unity." (Lenin, **CW 34**, p. 53)

In the course of that struggle, the sources of errors will be laid bare. Those with fundamental agreement around Marxist-Leninist principles can resolve differences on the basis of their underlying ideological unity. On the other hand, a line which derives mainly from bourgeois ideology will necessarily reveal its true features in struggle. "Truth develops in the struggle against falsehood," according to Mao; just as certainly, falsehood is exposed in its struggle against truth. If they do draw from a basically anti-Marxist source--if they do represent mainly anti-proletarian interests--then mistakes will erect themselves into a definite system in the course of ideological struggle, revealing their bourgeois inspiration. In this vein Lenin wrote that

"otzovism--to the extent that it is evolving from a mere mood into a **trend**, a system of politics--is departing from revolutionary Marxism." (Lenin, CW 15, p.356)

Since errors manifest the influence of bourgeois ideology, any attempt to justify an error must necessarily draw upon the bourgeois sources of that error. What begins as a "simple" and relatively minor error can, through this process, develop into a serious deviation or even a full-fledged anti-Marxist trend. In the struggle between the Menshevik and Bolshevik positions at and following the second RSDLP Congress, Lenin held that "the opportunism of Martov and Axelrod on questions of organization" was "less fundamental than questions of tactics, let alone of programme." (Lenin, **One Step Forward, Two Steps Back, CW 7**, p. 404) The struggle to **defend** this opportunism, however, necessarily ranged over more than organizational questions.

"...the isolated, random error over Paragraph 1 has grown into a quasi-system of opportunist views on matters of organization...in which the connection between this fact and the basic division of our Party into a revolutionary and an opportunist wing becomes increasingly apparent to all." (**Ibid.**, p. 411)

The justification of opportunism in matters of organization involved an appeal to opportunism in ideological and political line.

"Conscious that its fundamental position is indefensible from the standpoint of the Party's interests, it [the new **Iskra**, organ of the Mensheviks] is busy searching out real and imaginary differences to provide an ideological screen for that position; and in this search, it is turning more and more for its material to the Right wing of the Party--the former opponents of **Iskra**--and

drawing ever closer to them ideologically, trying to rehabilitate their theories..." ("To The Party," **CW 7**, p. 456)

In other words, insofar as they do not already take a systematic form, deviations at one level may "seek out" a justification at another level.

The strengthening of the "Left-Wing" deviation in the U.S. communist movement illustrates both kinds of development. In its ideological, political, and party-building lines, the communist movement has moved to the "Left" since the beginning of the current phase of organized anti-revisionist activity (around 1968). With the springing up of numerous study groups and local organizations, small-circle mentality was bound to dominate their organizational lines. In such a situation, small-circle mentality often enables a Marxist-Leninist group to differentiate itself and its tasks from the mass movement, and to ensure its identity and survival against the pressures of a mass movement led by reformists. We could therefore say that small-circle mentality can play a somewhat progressive role at the birth of a Marxist movement. At the same time, due to ideological immaturity, the political and ideological lines of various emerging groups presented a mixture of Right and "left," as well as many correct features.

After 1969-1970, many small collectives began to unify into several large organizations, a process which lost momentum by late 1973. It saw a struggle against small-circle mentality in party-building line, a struggle temporarily lost due principally to the "left" sectarianism of the largest groups. They did not demonstrate a willingness to conduct protracted ideological struggle, to centralize that struggle while encouraging the most democratic debate, to "cure the disease to save the patient," In polemics among the largest tendencies each opportunistically seized upon the others' mistakes to crow that the two-line struggle had reached a glorious conclusion, that the "New Left" was exposed, that the ultra-left was driven out, that the "dogmatist" and the "opportunist" lines had been revealed, etc., etc. Having failed to unify the movement, the largest tendencies had only two alternatives: they could do self-criticism and turn their attention once more to clearing up the disagreements which divide Marxist-Leninists, or they could almost immediately form their own parties. Unless they re-entered the party-building movement as a part, and not the whole, of that movement, they would have to form a party, and quickly. To hesitate would mean losing the one justification for declaring themselves a Party: the supposed "clarification of the two lines" provided by the "exposure" of the other two major organizations.<sup>1</sup>

Because their own "left" lines accounted for a lot of the movement's disunity, they were not about to initiate self-criticism. Instead they tried to

defend their "left" sectarianism through a turn to increasingly "left" opportunist arguments in matters of political line. The semi-Trotskyism of the CL's international line, the RU's "left" opposition to democratic rights and the fight against white supremacy around issues like busing, and the OL's "principle" of "no unity of action with revisionists" or their discovery of "abstentionism" as a united front tactic (Boston busing struggle, the USWA presidential election) in each case justified their organizational motion and prepared the groundwork for their isolated Party Congresses. In all this the largest tendencies gave the communist movement a lesson in the dangers of the "left" line.

Unfortunately, a number of the most visible of the organized smaller groups failed to profit by these negative examples. The consolidation of a "left" opportunist line on party-formation, combined with commandist practices of democratic centralism, had as perhaps its worst consequence the reinforcement of **small-circle mentality**. At a time when by all rights small-circle mentality had lost any positive function among the Marxist-Leninist forces, the stand of the largest groups bolstered it. Because many of the small groups shared an ideological framework similar to that of the larger ones, and because their critique of the "pre-parties" analyzed them as basically Rightist, a strengthened small-circlism also sought justification in ultra-leftism, sometimes of an even more poisonous variety than that of the parties. Journals and newspapers multiplied, but common debate around burning issues fell off. Expulsions and splits increased, of which the four-way split of the Black Workers Congress was the most important. When the Workers Congress (M-L) tried to unify what it called the Leninist trend behind a common organ, presumed members of that trend undertook yet more journals. And when a number of the "Left-Wing" groups attempted to unify themselves into what was variously called the "revolutionary wing," the "revolutionary trend," or the "genuine trend," some of the most destructive struggle the movement has seen broke out, and, amid reciprocal charges of "hegemonism" and "circle-spirit," sent the constituent groups in every direction.<sup>2</sup>

We can summarize the "Left-ward drift of the communist movement in party-building, political and ideological line as a two-fold process. On the one hand, sectarianism arose as a somewhat "random, isolated error," natural to the beginnings of a communist movement, and natural to the class strata in which it principally found its social base, (see below, Chapter V) Sectarianism in party-building line therefore grew up, as in the case of the circle spirit at the time of the Second RSDLP Congress, somewhat independently from a given ideological deviation, "left" or Right. Of that former period, Lenin wrote that "only the circle atmosphere could preserve the ideological individuality of these elements." (CW 7, p. 455) In our

movement, the maturation of the "left" deviation has served to preserve the circle atmosphere. The appeal to "left" arguments in ideological and political line bolsters the splintering of the Marxist-Leninist forces, and fans a sectarian spark into a roaring "Leftist" fire.

On the other hand, sectarianism resulted from a "left" deviation, one which first grew up at the level of party-building line. The development of "Leftism" therefore has meant an increasingly fierce struggle on the part of petty-bourgeois revolutionism against a Marxist-Leninist line, a struggle which, while begun at the level of party-building line, would inevitably be joined on every major ideological and political issue. The "ideological individuality" of the many groups was therefore largely of a "left" type. "Preserving it" meant reinforcing "left" opportunism. As the bourgeois line and the Marxist-Leninist line intensified their struggle, the "left" line became more "mature" and more theoretical. What had been minor differences in emphasis now take on the character of a full-blown trend.

In summary, the sectarianism which plagues the communist movement is not a simple sectarianism. It is a "left" deviation which has first developed at the level of party-building line, and exists there in its most pronounced form, but which expresses itself elsewhere. The "left" in "left" sectarianism is determined both by the "left" nature of the sectarianism in our movement, and by the "left" nature of the deviation which inspires it.

By briefly tracing the historical and theoretical relationship between "Leftism" in ideological and political lines and in party-building, we have attempted to indicate why we consider "left" sectarianism the most pressing manifestation of present-day "Left-Wing" Communism, and "left" opportunism in political line a secondary but growing problem. Though one has played and continues to play the leading role in the party-building process, these "left" errors condition each other and stem from the same ideological roots. For these reasons, the struggle against "left" opportunism in political line is an inextricable part of the overall struggle against "left" opportunism. In the following five sections we will briefly discuss some of the principal "left" political positions within the anti-revisionist camp.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The history since the Founding Congresses of the CLP and RCP bears out this description of their dilemma in the period before they announced their party character. Despite paying lip-service to the idea that many honest communist forces exist outside "the Party," neither the CLP nor the RCP has

managed to unite with a single Marxist-Leninist organization or collective since their formations. A similar fate awaits the October League (M-L) if it persists in "going against the Marxist-Leninist unity tide," waving the banner of unity to oppose unity, and forming yet another "Left-Wing" party (though the OL has already demonstrated a flair for finding collectives where none existed before).

<sup>2</sup> We would not suggest that for all this the communist movement stagnated. As we indicated earlier, it continued to grow in a largely spontaneous fashion, and a whole series of new organizations emerged in the three years in question. The promise of those years lies with the increasingly wide denunciation of the "left" line which began to take shape then. From different directions and with different experiences in mind, communist groups began to chart a course at once anti-revisionist and anti-"left" opportunist. The viable organizations in the movement today are those who recognize or will recognize the need to sharpen and deepen the two-line struggle with petit-bourgeois revolutionism.