

Proletarian Unity League

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

Chapter 2: The Danger from the "Left"

H. The Liquidation of Theory--From the "Left" or...

"To hell with this petty sectarian wrangling, let's build the Fightback!"

If the main danger does in fact come from the "Left," then we can expect that it has sought to hide the true features of "Leftism." We have to examine critically the accepted definitions of "left" opportunism with the knowledge that it is the "Left" trend which has won them broad acceptance. The most widely accepted differentiation between the "Left" and the Right falls into this category. Following these definitions, right opportunism liquidates theory in favor of "practice, practice, practice" while "left" opportunism liquidates practice in favor of bookworship. The communist movement owes these distinctions to groups like the Revolutionary Union (RCP), the Black Workers Congress, and the Communist League (CLP), and they constitute an apology for "left" adventurism and "left" sectarianism. Along with the charge that the "Right trend" ignores party-building and concentrates instead on "building the mass movement," the downplaying of the need for revolutionary theory frequently carries the main weight of the argument for Right opportunism as the chief danger.

This explanation of Rightism and ultra-leftism gives no specific ideological or political content to either deviation. Instead it defines each in essentially philosophical terms, as they relate to the dialectical union of theory and practice. According to this formula, the Weather Underground Organization and the IWW, say, are Right because they overemphasize action and practical experience, while the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee is "Left" because it mainly publishes articles, divorcing its social-democratic theory from social-democratic practice. While too exclusive an emphasis on one form of activity indicates the presence of a deviation, forms of activity in themselves do not define deviations. The "Left" deviation unites "left" opportunist theory with "left" opportunist practice. The Right deviation unites its Right theory with its Right practice. The real problem with the main trend in our movement is not that it has given too much emphasis to practice, but

rather that its practice is incorrect. Correspondingly, the real problem with the main trend in our movement is not that it has downplayed theory, but rather that it has promoted incorrect theories. An overemphasis on some narrow forms of practice and a neglect of our theoretical tasks does characterize the main trend. But those problems **result** from a deviation; they do not **define one**.

Now it is perfectly true that many individuals and groups do not see the necessity of defending and developing in all directions the theory of historical materialism. Nor do they see the full importance of party-building work. It is also true that right opportunism has these features. But again, these features are not unique to Right opportunism. As a brief review of some assumptions and history of ultra-leftism will show, "left" opportunism shares them.

Lenin identified the ideological source of "left" deviations as anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism. Let us therefore consider a representative sampling of the thought of Mikhail Bakunin, one of the so-called founders of anarchism, on the relationship between theory and other forms of revolutionary activity.

"He considered himself a revolutionist of the deed, 'not a philosopher and not an inventor of systems like Marx.' He refused to recognize the existence of any preconceived or preordained laws of history. He rejected the view that social change depends on the gradual unfolding of 'objective' historical conditions,... 'No theory, no ready-made system, no book that has ever been written will save the world...I cleave to no system. I am a true seeker.' By teaching the workers theories, he said, Marx would only succeed in stifling the revolutionary fervor every man already possesses-'the impulse to liberty, the passion for equality, the holy instinct of revolt.' Unlike Marx's 'scientific socialism,' his own socialism, Bakunin asserted, was 'purely instinctive.' (From the preface by Sam Dolgoff, anarchist admirer of Bakunin, to **Bakunin on Anarchy**, p. xiv)

"And what are we going to do? Teach the people. That would be stupid. The people know themselves, and better than we do, what they need...Our task is not to teach the people but to rouse them...Up to now 'they have always rebelled in vain because they have rebelled separately...[Shades of the RU's "linking up" struggles] we can render them invaluable assistance, we can give them what they have always lacked, what has been the principal cause of all their defeats. We can give them the unity of a universal movement by rallying their own forces.' (quoted by Marx and Engels in MEL on **Anarchism and Anarcho-syndicalism**, p. 113)

"We have confidence only in those who reveal by deeds their devotion to the revolution, without fear of torture and dungeons, and we disavow every word which is not directly followed by a deed. We don't require purposeless propaganda any more; we need no propaganda which does not fix with definiteness the hour and the place where it will realize the purpose of the revolution.... All babblers who will not understand this will be brought to silence by force....

"The idea has value for us only in so far as it serves the great work of **universal and total destruction**. A revolutionist who studies revolution only in books will never be worth anything...Without taking any thought of our lives, without shrinking from any threat, any hindrance, or any danger, we must break into the life of the people with a series of bold, yes, audacious undertakings, and to instil them with a belief in their own strength, arouse them, unite them, and lead them to the triumph of their own affairs." (From **Principles of Revolution**)

If revisionism and anarchism share a disdain for theory, what distinguishes "Left in form. Right in essence," from Right in form, Right in essence?

Revisionism puts the task of "making" revolution in the hands of the objective factor-economic crisis, the "tyranny of monopoly," etc. It claims that these factors will push the masses inexorably toward socialist revolution, as they see it. Therefore the revisionists and other reformists place primary emphasis on involving the masses in the reform struggle, at whatever level the masses spontaneously express readiness for, and generally oppose leading revolutionary struggles as unnecessarily divisive. In their view, once the masses are in motion, the development of objective factors, the intensification of basic contradictions, etc., will propel them towards the socialist goal.

"The struggle for socialism-the ultimate aim-is inherent in the struggle against the main opponent of that goal-monopoly capital. Every gain wrested from monopoly capital, small or large, strengthens the forces of socialism. Indeed, the basic forces in the anti-monopoly coalition also constitute the basic forces for the achievement of socialism...We are convinced of the fundamental unity of the struggle for reforms and the struggle for socialism...Thus the struggle for revolution is the logical continuation of the struggle for a better life...Through immediate struggle workers organize and learn the need to battle further. They learn who the enemy is and how to fight ultimately to the socialist revolution." (**New Program of the Communist Party U.S.A.**, 1970, pp. 83, 88, and 89)

To hear the revisionists tell it, everything comes to him who waits. All this shall be yours without the conscious intervention of any Marxist-Leninist party. If socialist struggle grows inevitably out of reform struggle as its "logical continuation," if no qualitative distinction exists between the two, then revolutionary theory and the revolutionary party become superfluous. The reformists can conduct the reform struggle; they even have the appropriate reformist theories to guide their reformist practice. And since they bring the masses to socialism merely by engaging them in the fight for reforms, the task devolves upon Marxist-Leninists to transform themselves into better reformists, to build a better reform struggle.

"Leftists," on the other hand, have little time for objective factors. If they consider them at all, they regard them as having sufficiently matured for the launching of wide-scale revolutionary battles, or as preventing any action whatsoever (this last is a specific Trotskyist variant). Instead, "Leftists" gaze longingly on the masses as a powderkeg awaiting a sudden spark. They dismiss the current level of mass consciousness, whether that of the advanced, the intermediate or the backward, as the product of bad leadership (the so-called "crisis of revolutionary leadership" particularly obsesses the Trotskyist movement). Above all, they believe in the mobilizing power of **action**: for the anarcho-syndicalists, this will take the form of diffuse organizations dedicated to direct action in every situation, to no compromises, and no retreats; for the anarchists, the search after that magic form of activity which will unleash "the evil passions" (Bakunin, quoted by Marx) of the masses (bombs, assassinations, militant demonstrations, or what the U.S. New Left and New Left-derived groups-RSB take note-called "actions"). Theoretical struggle obviously has very little place in this design, and the Party itself ultimately has next to none, despite all the protestations to the contrary. For "leftists," the situation calls for a relatively small band of determined revolutionaries who will brook no compromise with the patient accumulation of forces, the organization of the masses, or the analysis of particular situations, all so many obstacles to "getting on with it." The situation does not call for a strong Communist Party. Therefore they set about less to "build the mass movement" than to unchain it.

The history of the U.S. workers' and communist movements contains ample evidence of the "Leftist" liquidation of both theoretical struggle and the, strengthening of the revolutionary party in the name of building the revolutionary mass movement. To achieve a comprehensive conception of "leftism," we need to view it historically, both nationally and internationally. Most revolutionaries today tend to follow this advice in regard to revisionism, but do not apply it to the study of "Leftism." We will therefore consider a "left" trend from a much earlier period of U.S. history, namely, the IWW.

Perhaps the most important ideological struggle within the IWW occurred in its early years, a struggle which peaked in 1908 with the expulsion of De Leon and the SLP. (The SLP went on to organize another IWW based in Detroit.) De Leon himself had strong syndicalist tendencies, coupled with familiar forms of social-democratic ideology in a peculiar "unity of opposites" (For example, he repudiated all reforms as "banana peels" thrown under the feet of the proletariat, yet advocated evolutionary change in which the ballot box and the big industrial union would usher in socialism. He also opposed violence, most immigrants, and the struggle against Jim Crow). In the 1908 debate, however, De Leon argued for political action, which he understood narrowly as electoral politics, while the direct actionists opposed it. Philip Foner writes,

"By the spring of 1908, this interminable squabble had thoroughly disgusted rank and file elements in the IWW...who felt that the endless controversy over De Leonism was interfering with the all-important task of organizing the unorganized. 'Why doesn't the IWW grow faster?' these elements asked, and they answered: Too many political squabbles fill the Bulletin, taking away valuable space from organizational activity. The Bulletin should not be used for anything but the propaganda for industrial unionism.' 'Clear the decks for more constructive work...' went the appeal from the Northwest, 'for more organizing...' The Bulletin rebuked Heslewood (a Wobbly from the Northwest who wrote, 'Tell them there is too much to do to bother with such small matters, and if they don't like it go to hell.') and others like him for dismissing significant theoretical questions so casually...At the same time, the Bulletin conceded that its critics were justified in their major complaint, and that it was time to concentrate on organizing the unorganized."

(History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Vol. IV, pp. 106-7)

Throughout its history, the IWW largely dismissed the importance of theory in favor of direct action, a revolutionary syndicalist notion of class-consciousness, and the economic struggle. In the terms of our present-day discussion, it submerged the "conscious element" in the revolutionary mass movement.

In the twenty-year history of the U.S. anti-revisionist movement, the downplaying of theory and of propaganda activities connected to party-building has had far more in common with the anarcho-syndicalism of the IWW than it does with the revisionism of the CPUSA. For example, the RU's and the OL's disregard for theoretical training and their calls to "build the struggle, consciousness and revolutionary unity of the working class" or to "build the Fightback" stems less from a disdain for theory **per se** than from a worship of action, and a belief in the omnipotence of subjective activity. To

take a final, rather infamous case from an earlier phase of the anti-revisionist movement, let us consider the Progressive Labor-inspired slogan, "Less talk, more action-fight racism." In other words, don't analyze the character of national oppression and white supremacy (in particular, don't quarrel with PL's view of nationalism), don't investigate why and how democratic rights must and can be won. Instead, let's get it on, let's take an action, which will do far more convincing than words and pamphlets ever could. Can any more succinct (and almost characteristically American) summary of "Left" frenzy be imagined? And what does the slogan oppose to theory and to the organization of the conscious element, if not "building the mass movement"?