By David Frankel

In the midst of the recent coal strike, club-swinging thugs led by the Revolutionary Commu­
nist Party (RCP), a Maoist organization, tried to break up a meeting in Houston in support of the miners. Several union activists, including socialists, were seriously injured by the attackers.

The attack in Houston, which occurred on March 17, was only the latest in a series of such incidents. At a strike support rally in Los Angeles February 22, RCP members provoked a brief physical confrontation with stew­ards of union workers Local 216, which was hosting the meeting.

Earlier that week, the RCP disrupted a plant-gate collection for the Miners Right to Strike Committee (MRSC) in Morgantown, W. Va. RCP members shouted, “Don’t give to the Miller bureaucrats,” referring to United Mine Workers President Arnold Miller.

What has led the RCP to engage in such actions? There is a strong element of desperation in the RCP’s resort to violence. To begin with, the group has just undergone a split in which it lost roughly half of its former members. Bob Avakian and his followers will no longer regain any of his lost members by launching attacks on labor solidarity meetings. But such actions may help him to silence—at least for a while—questions and frustrations among his re­main­ing followers about the increasing isolation of the RCP.

RCP members, operating through a group known as the Miners Right to Strike Committee (MRSC), gained some following in the coalfields during the wildcat strikes in 1975 and 1978. But the RCP and its MRSC were isolated and discredited during the recent national strike. Miners found that the RCP was unable to answer the big questions facing the UMWA and the labor movement as a whole. How to defend gains they had won in the past? How to strengthen the union for future battles? How to develop a leadership that will stand as the union’s vanguard?

Failing to win support for its ideas by argument and discussion, the RCP has turned to thuggery. Unfortunately, RCP members have been widely identified (in part by red-baiting from the compa­nies and the news media) as the “radical” in the UMWA. This gives a completely false picture of what socialists stand for and serves to discredit socialist ideas among miners and other workers.

It is important to clarify what’s wrong with the RCP’s policies and how their destructive actions have nothing in common with a socialist or revolu­tion­ary strategy.

Sectoral policy

At the heart of the RCP’s trade-union strategy is the attempt to substitute phony “rank and file” groups run by the RCP for the union itself. These tiny groups devote their energy to slurring the names of the present union officials—without explaining the new policies needed if the unions are to defend the workers’ rights and living standards.

The RCP has only a handful of members in the UMWA. But in setting up its MRSC, they insisted that this was the “real” rank-and-file movement in the union, the only place for genuine militants.

When solidarity actions such as this one. Formations similar to the MRSC have been set up by the RCP in other unions. These all function as sections of the RCP’s National United Workers Organization (NUWO). The RCP’s entire strategy is based on trying to build NUWO—rather than the unions—as the mass organizations of the working class.

One has only to look at the publications of the NUWO and its sections to see this. Bank & File Unity, for example, is the newspaper of the Miners Rights to Strike Committee. On its back page, Bank & File Unity regularly publishes a list headlined, “What You Can Do.” Among the suggestions are circulating NUWO petitions, formation of NUWO chapters, distribution of NUWO literature, fund raising for the NUWO, and so on.

Nowhere do the Maoists suggest that the UMWA itself should put out literature explaining the min­ers’ demands, organize fund raising, solidarity meetings, or publicity. In fact, the RCP had no proposals whatsoever for how the UMWA and other unions could fight the bosses and operators and block their attack on the miners. The main activity of the RCP during the strike was to organize demonstra­tions against the UMWA leadership under the empty slogan, “No sellout.”

Two strategies in action

The Socialist Workers Party and Young Socialist Alliance followed a completely different policy during the miners’ strike.

The SWP and YBA began from the standpoint of what was needed to win the strike. Socialists focused on showing the propaganda of the bosses, explaining the real issues in the strike, and helping to build large, visible sections of solidarity with the miners. To be effective, such support activities had to draw into action the broadest possible forces—especially the forces of the orga­nized labor movement.

The socialists in the RCP viewed solidarity actions that were not carried out under their control as a threat. They acted as if little RCP-led groups could substitute for the power of the organized union movement.

As MRSC leaflet handed out in Pittsburgh gives an indication of the Maoists’ absurd pretense that they were solely responsible for solidarity with the miners. According to the leaflet:

“The NATIONAL UNITED WORKERS ORGA­NIZATION (NUWO) and its mine section MINERS RIGHT TO STRIKE COMMITTEE (MRSC) are building support for the strike throughout the country. The NUWO auto section has collected over $500 at plant gate collections in Detroit, and here in Pittsburgh the NUWO steel section collected a similar sum at the steel mills.”

What the leaflet didn’t say was that NUWO activists carrying out such collections made no effort to get the support of the union locals where the collections were taken. Plant-gate collections taken by union stewards would have raised much more money for the strikers. And motions for such collections would have helped build discussion of the miners’ strike before the union movement as a whole.

Sabotage

Not only did the RCP/NUWO/MBSC fail to help organize effective support for the miners, but they actually opposed the broad labor-sponsored events that took place.

In Los Angeles, when UAW Local 216 voted to carry out a plant-gate collection for the UMWA and the Steelworkers, Kentucky, strikers, the MRSC carried out a countercollection in its own name. Despite the Maoist disruption, auto workers contributed more than $1,700 in two days during one strike shift change. Such union-sponsored actions raised about $30,000 in the Los Angeles area during the course of the strike and another $60,000 in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Thousands of workers across the country at­tended strike support meetings and rallies, joined the MRSC, and contributed money, car caravans to take food and clothing to the strikers, and sent donations and resolutions of support. But the RCP maximized such acts by accusing the miners of “bureaucracy” and “sellout.”

But the RCP would have nothing to do with the miners’ battle, except to brand the union officialdom as an “empty slogan,” a massacre. The SWP, for example, is the newspaper of the Miners Right to Strike Committee.

The sectarians in the RCP viewed solidarity action as a threat. They acted as if little RCP-led groups could substitute for the power of the organized union movement.

Despite the super revolutionary posturing of the RCP, its sectarian opposition to any effort to mobilize the power of the unions behind the coal strikers amounted in practice to sabotage of the miners’ cause.

Union bureaucracy

Not only socialists but tens of thousands of other union activists see the need for a new, fighting leadership in the unions. Millions more workers are painfully aware that the present union officialdom is doing a poor job of defending their interests, without even seeing any alternatives.

The problem is how to build a mass movement within the unions that can win the necessary changes. What answer do the RCP and its MRSC have to the problems of program and leadership in the unions? Only this—to brand the union officialdom as an enemy that does not stand in the way of their profits.

Thus, an MRSC leaflet handed out February 6 at a strike support demonstration in Pittsburgh de­scribed: “... the coal industry has always passed the cost of labor on to the owners who have shown how desperate they are to crush us and have a work force that does not stand in the way of their profits. Our international has stood right with the operators in doing this.”

The leaflet concluded: “The lines are drawn. On one side stand the operators with their partners in our own international and government. On our side stand the rank and file, the growing support of workers across the country.”

It is true that the high-priced bureaucrats who have usurped control over the unions have always presented the program dictated by the bosses. (It is not true that the United Mine Workers is identical to other unions in this respect, a point we will discuss later.)

The union bureaucracy accept the need for “fair profits” and “restraint” on workers’ demands for higher wages, job security, and better conditions.

How Maoists failed test of miners’ strike

RCP’s sectarian policy
They stifle union democracy. They tie the hands of workers and Democrats and Republicans. They accept and even help to enforce discrimination by the employers against women, Blacks, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans. They know more than just how bad the bureaucrats are. Revolutionaries also have to take into account some of the workers’ own experiences of struggle, defending the workers’ jobs, wages, and working conditions. The answer is no. Many were feeling the pinch of a new recession without a paycheck. Others may have felt that the union was not in a position to do anything. The problem is that the independence of the miners to turn back the attack on their union showed the crucial importance of working-class solidarity. This concept has a broader meaning than simply that of unions supporting each other’s struggles. It is by labor supporting the struggles of Blacks, Chicanos, women, working farmers, and other oppressed layers of society that attempts to play off one section of the workers against others can be defeated. Finally, it is necessary for the labor movement to act independently of the employers and their government instead of seeking to collaborate with them. Here too, the miners set an example. They refused to trust the employers, and they communicated that well-justified mistrust to the whole country. The RCP tried to justify its violence with the lie that the meeting was organized to back the inadequate contract proposal voted down by miners over the weekend of March 5. An RCP leaflet handed out after the assault declared, “Confrontation Exposes Supporters of Miller’s Latest Sellout.” However, the real purpose of the meeting was explained in testimony given by the organizers of the rally. It said, “We planned tonight’s meeting to give people in the Houston area an opportunity to hear a first-hand report from the miners and pensioners.” They organized mass meetings, such as one above in Pennsylvania, where union members were able to democratically discuss issues facing UMWA.

New leaders stepped forward during miners’ strike. They organized mass meetings, such as one above in Pennsylvania, where union members were able to democratically discuss issues facing UMWA.

layers of workers see the need for a change. These are all qualities completely absent in sectors such as the RCP.

In the coal strike, for example, they were blind to the fact that behind the endorsement some union officials gave to solidarity actions lay the pressure of the rank and file. By refusing to call on the official union leadership to throw its weight behind the rank and file. By refusing to call on the official union leadership to throw its weight behind the right to vote on their contract. For the mass meeting, the RCP ignored even oppose—the right of the rank to discuss, decide, and implement policies in their own interests.

Union democracy

Key to the process of developing new policies and a new leadership is the fight for union democracy—the right of the ranks to discuss, decide, and implement policies in their own interests. In the fall of the RCP ignored even oppose—the right of the rank to discuss, decide, and implement policies in their own interests. But the RCP ignored even oppose—the right of the rank to discuss, decide, and implement policies in their own interests. This is evident from the contemptuous disregard for the gains miners have fought for by the corrupt regime of former UMWA President Tony Boyle and electing the Miners for Democracy slate in 1972. Under Boyle’s rule, dissident miners would find that their medical cards had been taken away. Retired miners who failed to toe the Boyle line would have their pension checks stopped. Those who went too far in opposing Boyle, like Jack Yahtokaz, who ran against him in 1960, were murdered. With the victory of the Miners for Democracy, important changes took place in the UMWA. District elections were held, including in eight UMW districts that had been under trusteeship since the days of John L. Lewis. The UMWA Journal opened UMWA, and to raise funds to help support striking miners and pensioners. Not one speaker voiced support for the second contract.

By their use of violence to try to settle differences in the working-class movement, the RCP is resorting to the same methods used by the old Boyle bureaucracy in the UMWA. The RCP thus offers a preview of how it would operate if by some unfortunate change it ever obtained positions of leadership in the union.

Sectarian logic

The sectarian logic of focusing its attack on the union leadership rather than the bosses finally became so clear that the RCP was forced to pull back and denounce the consequences of its own practice.

The March 1978 issue of Revolution, the RCP’s newspaper, contains the following passage: “... the capitalists are trying to use diversions to confuse the issue and change the direction of the anti-union campaign.”

The RCP goes on to denounce the “Dump Miller” campaign as “a diversion” cooked up by “opportunist union hacks.” “Objectively,” it adds, “these guys are serving the interests of the coal owners and the capitalists by confusing the issues.”

Never mentioned is the fact that during the strike the foremost advocate of the “Dump Miller” stance was the Miners Right to Strike Committee.

Strike lessons

Socialists believe that the miners set a powerful example for all working people. By understanding and extending the strength of the miners’ strike, workers can take some basic lessons and implement them in their struggles.

The poor of ideas is one of working-class solidarity. This concept has a broader meaning than simply that of unions supporting each other’s struggles. It is by labor supporting the struggles of Blacks, Chicanos, women, working farmers, and other oppressed layers of society that attempts to play off one section of the workers against others can be defeated.

Finally, it is necessary for the labor movement to act independently of the employers and their government instead of seeking to collaborate with them.

Here too, the miners set an example. They refused to trust the employers, and they communicated that well-justified mistrust to the whole country. The miners knew that if safety was left to the bosses’ discretion, their average life expectancy would plummet.

When the Carter administration stepped in and tried to break the strike with a Taft-Hartley injunction, the Miners had already sortied miners away from another valuable lesson in independent labor action. What is necessary is that the independence of the ranks of the UMWA on the picket line be generalized in the political sphere. The UMWA—and the labor movement as a whole—must be fought by the Democratic and Republican parties. Labor needs its own political party if it is to effectively defend its interests.

Poverty of ideas

These are lessons that are of vital importance to every working person in the United States. Yet during the entire 110 days of the coal strike, the RCP/MRSC never raised the idea of independent labor political action. Not once.

They said nothing about the need for union democracy.

On the issue of working-class solidarity, the RCP was not short on rhetoric. But in practice it opposed building a broad strike support movement. Now, with this miserable performance behind them, the Maoists are trying to overcome their poverty of ideas by physical attacks on those who disagree with them.