

What is Economism and Why is it NO DAMN GOOD?

The working class movement in the United States today is full of contradictions and is in a period of sharp transition. Millions of workers hate their lives, the way they're ground down, chewed up and spit out by a system they do not control; and yet, the influence of bourgeois ideology, trade unionism and reformist illusions, fostered and reinforced by the long period of the dominance of the United States, as the world's biggest imperialist power, is still very strong. Millions can see or feel that the coming era will be one of shattering social and political upheaval, including a world war between the United States and the Soviet Union; but millions do not yet grasp the fact that the working class itself can and must play a decisive, independent historical role in the coming crisis.

But the state of the working class movement cannot be really understood merely by looking at the workers "as a whole," as a monolithic bloc. For a specific feature of today's movement, which is of tremendous significance, is the coming into being of the relatively small but growing and active core of advanced, class conscious proletarians. Within the ranks of this advanced core, the question of how to overcome the still primitive level of consciousness of their millions of fellow workers, and how to transform this movement into a mighty army capable of seizing the revolutionary initiative in the coming crisis is increasingly a subject of needed discussion and debate.

The primitiveness of the workers movement as a whole is keenly felt by the advanced worker, the worker who has himself or herself "dared to dream the dream of revolution," but yet is often heard exploding in frustration: "I'd die for a chance to get my hands around the throat of the ruling class, but you'll never get the rest of these lunkheads to get off their ass and fight!" Anyone who is serious about making revolution knows that it's not a matter of a few thousand or even a few tens of thousands of fighters, however heroic, "storming the Bastille." This question of how and on what basis our movement will grow and become capable of influencing and actually leading millions in time of sharp crisis is a fundamental one.

It is a question on which there are two, sharply different lines, two different roads: do we strive to adapt our agitation and our work to the backwardness of the present movement, find some means of appealing politically to where the "average joe is at," and concentrate on leading struggles promising the workers something "concrete" or "palpable," in order to overcome our isolation and lay the basis for introducing revolutionary politics at a later stage, when the workers are ready as a result of the sharpening of the crisis and the experience they have gained in the economic struggle against the employers and the government? Or do we, on the contrary, strive to divert this spontaneous tendency in the movement toward trade unionism and reformism, unite, mobilize and bring forward the most advanced and far-sighted section of the workers, and conduct broad and bold revolutionary propaganda and agitation which exposes bluntly and vividly the thousand and one outrages, the schemes and plans for "reforms" and "improvements" of the present order, which seems so "palpable, immediate and concrete," and are in reality just so many bourgeois illusions? What's the point of something so advanced, so full of risks as May 1st? Why is a newspaper—the *Revolutionary Worker*, the main

weapon for preparing today; why not something "more concrete" like trade union struggle?

The difference between these two roads is basically the difference between what Lenin termed "economism... slavish cringing before spontaneity" and genuine, revolutionary Marxism. Lenin deeply exposed the features and reactionary nature of economism, particularly in his brilliant book *What Is To Be Done?*, which we can only scratch the surface of here.

Economism is basically the ideology of bourgeois reformism disguised as Marxism. It isn't the only opportunist deviation from the genuine science of proletarian revolution, but it is one of the most pernicious and persistent, because it has the appearance of offering a cheap and easy way for revolutionaries to "win friends and influence people"—to gain a mass base quickly by seeming to lead the workers toward goals which are practical, realistic and attainable. "How can you talk to people about some distant dream of revolution when they don't even have enough to live on now?" or, "How can you talk of revolution when people are already engaged in this or that struggle? Let's first prove that we revolutionaries can lead the masses successfully in the struggle to attain some immediate victories yielding some immediate benefits—then they'll listen to us when we talk about overthrowing the government."

In Lenin's time the Russian economists hid their line behind the two-stage character of the Russian revolution where the first task was to overthrow the Tsar, establish a democratic republic, and then move on to the socialist stage. But what the economist line meant was that the workers should simply fight for better economic conditions and leave the political struggle against the Tsar's autocracy to the liberal bourgeoisie. Never could the Russian proletariat be prepared to seize power with such a line.

Reformism is Un-Realistic

But despite the spontaneous appearance that "it's easier to reform this system than it is to overthrow it," or that "you can get workers to take up economic struggles but you'll never get them to take up the broader political questions," the reality is the opposite. Fundamentally, it is impossible to reform this system and the temporary concessions and the crumbs the imperialists were able to toss at the workers and the oppressed nationalities, meager as they were, during their period of worldwide dominance are all being snatched away. What does the future hold in store for the masses of workers and oppressed of this country as well as the world in the next ten years, as the world imperialist crisis approaches its climax and this system plunges headlong into an inferno?

Can anybody think that the masses will thank us later if we tell them today that the most important or the main thing they should be doing is fighting for higher wages, better housing, or a cleaner environment? Will the workers praise us because, at a time when what they urgently required was a vanguard, conscious leadership capable of laying bare the roots of this crisis and the tasks confronting them, we instead "adapted" ourselves to the "current level of the movement" by reinforcing the lies and dangerous illusions fostered by the bourgeoisie and their allies in the "labor movement"?

Just like Lenin pointed out to the

"economists" of his time, there is more to the world than pay stubs and today's full belly. And we can see in today's situation that the bourgeoisie, in times of crisis, finds itself forced to drag the masses into political life, forced to "train them" to view all the questions of the day from the standpoint of the bourgeoisie. "Adopt the Cave-man point of view of the bourgeoisie around Iran," they scream in 1,000 ways. View Afghanistan through the eyes of the

hypocritical class of capitalists who oppose Soviet domination only because they want to dominate everything themselves. How are the workers going to take a correct stand later if they don't get trained starting now, concretely, in breaking with the bourgeois point of view and taking up the proletarian one on every world event?

It was with this in mind that Lenin blasted the economists of his time who,
Continued on page 18



Technicians enter Three Mile Island nuke preparing to release radioactivity into the air—which they claim won't cause any "serious" damage to health or the environment.

Nuclear Accidents—Valuable Experience?

It has recently come to light that accidents at nuclear power plants are really a great boon to mankind. According to the general director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Sigvard power industry is that we have had too few accidents. It's expensive, but that's how you gain experience."

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) must have been pleased with the recent accident at the Crystal River, Florida nuclear power plant where 60,000 gallons of radioactive water flooded out of the reactor's cooling system and into the plant. The usual script of lies was handed to the press. No. 1, "There is no cause for alarm," followed shortly with No. 2, "There has been no measured off-site release of radioactive material," ending with No. 3, "Non-essential employees from some areas inside the plant were evacuated even though it wasn't necessary." Following this accident an NRC director testified to the nuclear regulation subcommittee of Congress that it was a good thing the Three Mile Island breakdown almost wiped out Pennsylvania, because this time the control room operators "knew what to expect and how to deal with it."

In fact, the NRC was so pleased with the results of this most recent accident that they decided to provide the opportunity for even more rich experience with nuclear disasters. They blew the "all clear" whistle to signal an end to the ban on opening nuclear plants that had been imposed after Three Mile Island to cool out the anger of millions

fueled by that near melt-down.

According to Eklund's logic, it's really a shame that the Fermi breeder reactor that melted down near Detroit in 1969 didn't go all the way. After this incident a plant engineer commented, "We almost lost Detroit." Just think of the valuable experience the bourgeoisie could have gained if they had lost Detroit. Their mad scientists and statisticians could have stuffed their computers with information on how many people were killed immediately, how many died days and weeks after the meltdown and what their symptoms were, how many were maimed for life, how long it took to evacuate the area and how many weren't able to get out. What a treasure-house of experience was thrown down the drain! Of course, they would have had to wait a generation to study the malformed babies whose mothers were exposed to the radiation and this information might not be available before a nuclear war breaks out.

There is only one drawback to all this valuable "experience". Just as Three Mile Island brought tens of thousands into the streets, each new nuclear "mishap", each new brush with death, provides valuable "experience" for the masses of people about the nature of this system that plants nuclear time-bombs on our doorsteps and gets ready to burn up tens of millions in a nuclear war, and then calmly sums it up as "It's expensive, but that's how you gain experience."

Economism

Continued from page 11

as he wrote, were hung-up on "catchwords like: We must concentrate, not on the 'cream' of the workers, but on the 'average' mass worker; 'Politics always obediently follows economics.'" Lenin blistered "No. To advocate such a view, we repeat, is merely to lay the blame where it does not belong, to blame the masses of workers for one's own philistinism (who are the real lunkheads—RW)... We must blame ourselves, our lagging behind the mass movement for being unable as yet to organize sufficiently wide, striking and rapid exposures of all these despicable outrages. When we do that... the most backward workers will understand, or will feel that the students and members of religious sects, the muzhiks (peasants) and the authors are being abused and outraged by the very same dark forces that are oppressing and crushing him at every step of his life." (*What Is To Be Done?*) So Lenin gave tremendous emphasis to politics over economics, to the importance of class-conscious workers being aware of the actions and views of other classes and to the central role of a national newspaper of political exposure. He said a communist's ideal "should not be a trade union secretary, but a tribune of the people, able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it takes place."

The point, of course, is not that the fight against attacks on workers' living standards and the oppression that people face today should not be waged. They can be a starting point for masses awakening. The point is that the masses already have a thousand reformist chaletons making careers out of pandering to people's illusions. What it means to be the vanguard, what it means to be farsighted and class-conscious, is to understand that these illusions are chains which we must lead the workers and masses of people in breaking. And because they are lies and illusions, and because, to be frank about it, revolution is far more attainable, palpable and concrete, speaking in a fundamental historic sense, than the most clever schemes for reform, there exists a powerful material basis for a revolutionary line to take root among the masses.

Of course, starry-eyed idealism won't make it. We know that there's a lot of workers out there whose outlook has been so narrowed down, constricted and bourgeoisified that they think like and act like petty philistines—as exemplified by the angry remark of one worker to a comrade selling the *Revolutionary Worker* at a plant gate: "Yeah, but suppose I don't want to think?" These people are going to have to be slapped in the face hard by the brutal crisis and the impending collapse of what they still think is some eternal "American Way" before they'll wake up and decide that they do want to think. And there is also a core of hardened, and encrusted outright reactionary labor aristocrats, led by the trade union bureaucrats, who will probably go down fighting and dying for their right to lick the boots of the capitalists and maintain their positions as goons and overseers over the rest of the workers.

Even the more advanced workers tend to get pulled back to the level of the intermediate, even whipped around by the backward, when their understanding slips. They have to understand that at any given time the workers always divide into sections of advanced, intermediate, and backward and that the point is not to "mobilize everybody." That's why Chairman Bob Avakian wrote, talking particularly about May 1st in his major New Years 1980 article "In no way should the taking of 'independent historical action' by the advanced section of workers in this country, even if it is relatively small at this time, be underestimated or downgraded."

Spontaneously, people forget this. Even the fact that workers work together, socialized in industry, which is a great potential strength of the working class, can turn into its opposite temporarily if the advanced workers get

sucked in by the "social pressure" exerted by the backward. This spontaneous tendency is consciously reinforced by the trade unions, which are, at most times, a real pit of retreat for the advanced. What Lenin said about only fighting the economic struggle as a whole—that "the framework is too narrow"—definitely applies to the trade unions. In fact, in imperialist America they have been thoroughly corrupted, a quagmire trap for the advanced to slowly sink in. In the unions, the capitalists have the structure for their "carrot and stick" routine—we'll punish you, or if you "play ball" maybe there'll be a little slot for you. They have a whole system of handcuffs that they call "union channels" designed to suffocate any sparks of struggle and understanding under a mound of red tape. This all has to be pushed aside, or the workers' struggle at best will amount to the struggle for a little better conditions under the wage-slavery of capitalism.

All this makes for a powerful spontaneous pull away from real revolutionary work. So despite the fact that Lenin laid waste to the economists of his time, this ugly disease comes up again and again. The old Communist Party in this country practiced it for years. So even when the objective conditions have been more favorable for revolutionary work here (like in the '30s Depression) the workers' movement for the most part never made the transition to a class-conscious one here. Even today the pathetic CP scrambles around recommitting itself to the economic struggle as "the decisive arena" as its Chairman Gus Hall put it, in an article two years ago. Such a line is only aimed to keep the workers' faces buried in their bellies as the world roars by around them.

The Revolutionary Communist Party has learned from this and has no intention of throwing away the chance for revolution when it does arise. So we, too, have had to struggle against economism. This struggle became a major part of a split in our ranks two years ago when some old CP-style opportunists (now calling themselves the Revolutionary Workers Headquarters) left our ranks in order to uphold counter-revolution against Mao's line in China. In the course of the struggle against them, and the whole line which they concentrated, our Party was able to shed the economist line adopted at our founding Congress that economic work should be our "center of gravity", which means nothing but subordinating all else—including revolution—behind the economic struggle.

A Radical Rupture

So when we speak of "diverting," or of making a "radical rupture," with the spontaneous pull of the mass movement to expend its energy and zeal in the fight for reform, what we really mean is diverting the masses from and leading them in making a radical rupture with bourgeois ideology—the very ideology which has as its foundations the system of wage slavery.

Exactly because the revolutionary core of class-conscious workers today is still relatively small and bourgeois ideology still exerts a very powerful grip, revolutionary work today means sharply challenging and struggling with many backward ideas among the masses. But this must not be understood one-sidedly, or the material basis for such revolutionary work will not be grasped. Not only does the unfolding of events and the sharpening of the crisis today confirm and reinforce the analysis of our Party, which is that this coming decade will see the climax of imperialist crisis and the sweeping of hundreds of millions of people into political life, but even today among millions there exists, side by side with the illusions, the cynicism, and the low level of consciousness which is the legacy of living in a powerful imperialist country, even smoldering hatred for oppression, and erosion of illusions, and spirit of discontent which can be tapped and developed.

In other words, millions of workers and others, who sometimes appear to the advanced worker in moments of frustration as mere "lunkheads," also have dreams and aspirations of a higher order. It is the job of revolutionary

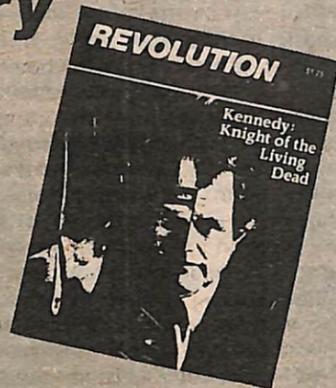
"tribunes of the people" to speak to these higher aspirations, to develop them and to show through our propaganda and agitation, as well as through the bold example of the advanced forces themselves, that these higher dreams indeed have a basis in reality and can be transformed into reality. This is the opposite of the degrading theory of economism, which slavishly "cringes before spontaneity" and is itself a theory of lunkheads and those who are convinced that the masses can never and have no right to rise above the stereotypes of "lunkishness" which the bourgeoisie likes to describe as "your average worker."

The revolutionary, class-conscious forces carry out the work on the stage provided by the objective situation. Is there some magic road to "getting a million workers around us" tomorrow? No, there isn't; it is not possible to do this; but what is possible and what we are doing, is bringing forward the tens of thousands of advanced, awakening members of our class, wielding them together into a dedicated determined force which is capable of influencing millions, causing them to sit up and take notice, and to declare that in the coming decade of the 1980s not just one road, but two roads, stretch out before the working class and the masses of people. The campaign to build revolutionary May Day (the manifesto of which promises the worker no palpable, and immediate "benefit" whatsoever, but which calls on the workers and the masses to take a stand against national discrimination and discrimination of all kind, to defend and rally around the masses revolutionary leadership and especially the Chairman of the RCP, Bob Avakian, to stand with the revolutionary people of the world and to

trample on the filthy red, white and blue flag of imperialism, and to fight for the independent historical interest of the working class in the coming war and crisis) and the broad distribution of the Party newspaper, the *Revolutionary Worker*, which trains the people to observe and understand every event and every development of the class struggle from the standpoint of the class-conscious worker, are far more crucial to the growth of our movement on a solid, revolutionary foundation than a hundred struggles for petty reforms and revokable concessions from the ruling class.

As the initial call for May Day 1980 put it, "...our force will be overwhelming and we'll finally triumph." The embryonic movement of today will become the colossus of tomorrow, capable of sweeping all of history before it. But our revolutionary movement will grow, not by "moving with the groove," and "going with the flow," by bowing to spontaneity and falling into the pit of economism. Our movement in embryo is the embryo of the new social order, the rule of the working class—a new social order which, through our revolutionary work and with the terminal crisis of imperialism approaching the boiling point, millions and hundreds of millions will be demanding, fighting and dying for, because revolution and socialism are the only way out, the only real road forward, and the only political goal which corresponds to the objective interests of the working class and all mankind. It is right now, at the very dawn of this upsurge, that every advanced, class-conscious worker should spit full in the face of economist "cringing before spontaneity" in the best Leninist tradition. □

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