where the "Trend" Going?

Ex-Maoists On the Road to Moscow

Irwin Silber

'88 Photos

WORKERS VANGUARD

major force in the struggle against the working they don't like either

Of the Trend one can truly say, "left in form, right in essence."

There is another crucial difference as well. Although the politics of the hard Maoist and ex-Maoist Communist organizations—Mike Klontz's Communist Party Marxist-Leninist (CPML), Jerry Tung's Communist Workers Party (CWP), Bob Avakian's Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), Nelson Peyre's Communist Labor Party (CLP), Milt Renten's Progressive Labor Party (PLP)—are profoundly counter-revolutionary, their cadre are far more

1948:

First issue of the National Guardian, the newspaper of the Progressive Party campaign for Henry Wallace.

Irwin Silber, "Afghanistan—The Battle Line Is Drawn"

Silber made his mark by seizing on the Cold War upsurge over Soviet intervention in Afghanistan as the moment for the soft/critical/ex-Maoists’ crossing of the US policy on the road back to Moscow.

Irwin Silber and the Guardian Tendency

As indicated by its wishful self-designation, “the Trend” likes to present itself as a new, broad, dynamic current in the American left. This is a completely fanciful project. When one speaks of the Trend, one is basically talking about Silber’s Line of March, not simply because it is the largest and most dynamic group. In the midst of the disillusioned, disoriented “M-L” milieu, Silber is a man who knows where he wants to go, he knows, because he’s been there. For over three decades the Guardian has represented a relatively defined radical/liberal audience. It has sought to be the voice of the fellow traveler, the petty-bourgeois wing of a (non-existent) popular front. And Silber is now calling the tune because he first and most clearly recognized that liberal stomachs were too weak for Peking’s increasingly unpopular front with the US.

It is anything but a historic accident that the Guardian originated as the organ of the Progressive Party of Henry Wallace. In 1948 there was a bourgeois popular-front breakaway movement, for which the Communist Party (CP) provided the organization and troops, around FDR’s naive and quixotic former Democratic vice president Volume I, Number 1 of the National Guardian was dated 18 October 1948, in the heat of Wallace’s presidential campaign. Its editorial statement stressed the paper’s continuity with the liberal politics of the Roosevelt period: "This editorial point of view will be a continuation and development of the progressive tradition set in our time by Franklin D. Roosevelt, and over-wholly supported by the American people in the last four elections."

By 1950 Wallace had renounced the Progressive Party, supported "our boys" in the Korean War and made copious mea culpas for having been a "Commie duped." After a disastrous showing by Progressive candidate Vincent Hallinan against Adlai Stevenson in 1952, the CP returned to its old policy of boring from within the Democratic Party. A number of CP fellow travelers today occupy positions relatively close together on the political spectrum. Silber’s support to Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, for instance, led Euro-communist Dorothy Healey to bait him for “Trotskyism.” However, such a view is a far cry from the Trend set. The Trend is moving from soft right-wing Maoism to fellow traveling with the Kremlin. For Silber this marks an unbreakable realist stance of the 1950s. A Guardian (8 October 1979) “On the Left” column was written by a guardian, demagogically, as they commented:

"However, in reacting against China’s reactionary foreign policy, LOM has increasingly dropped the struggle against revisionism and tends more and more to view the Soviet Union as a serious-minded than the trendy Trenders. What separates the “Trend” from the Stalinoid lost major force in the struggle against the working they don’t like either of the working they don’t like either..."
associated with the Progressive Party and the American Labor Party (ALP) in New York—Hallinan, National Guardian co-editor James Aronson, Paul Sweezy—dissented from this policy. This did not represent a more leftist impulse compared to the Communist Party, simply a more freelance style. William Z. Foster's demoralized CP labeled McCarthy fascist and prepared to take a dive. But how can a milieu of fellow travelers operate in semi-clandestinity? This would require a discipline and commitment utterly alien to them. Without CP backing the morphbound Progressive Party and ALP folded entirely, but the Hallinan-Aronson group maintained the paper and the politics. The Guardian came to see itself as the candle of nostalgia for the popular front in the dark night of McCarthyism.

This amorphous popular-front literature ran the gamut of Left politics. The Guardian's ecclesiastics—these are the worded Communists of the world Stalinist movement. The paper served as the "collective organizer" not of a communist vanguard, but of what editors Cedric Belfrage and Aronson referred to as a "character heading of their book" as the "Extended Guardian Family": 

"The radical America became more and more an undefined ghetto, our advertising more prone to rely on taking in inmates who depended on taking in other's washing." —Something to Guard: The Stormy Life of the National Guardian, 1949-1967

Soon they were "peddling coffee tables, Guatemalan skirts, 'Kantew baby clothes", later came the Guardian picnics, tours, etc. Insofar as they had a political perspective at all, they were waiting for (or at any rate hoping for) a new and more successful version of the Progressive Party.

In the early/mid-60s, the Guardian began to favor the "Third World" Stalinist regimes—Castro's Cuba, Mao's China, Ho's Vietnam—as against Moscow. (Here again the parallelism with the Monthly Review holds.) William Z. Foster's demoralized CP Moscow correspondent turned up in Hanoi, and the paper gradually took on a new tone influenced by the Third Worldism, black nationalism, sectoralist politics in the U.S. This gave it a distinct new ideological framework, in more than a few cases the sons and daughters of old Stalinists and former "party" activists could be seen at new and militant alternative to the stodgy Khrushchev/Brezhnev bureaucracy.

In February 1968 there was a palace coup in the Guardian offices, and the insurgents declared their solidarity with the Vietnamese guerrilla fighters. In order to abolish hierarchy the "New Guardian collective" dislodged former editor Aronson's office with an axe. But real control was in the hands of mod-rad journalist Jack Smith who brought in writers from SDS and the "underground press." Irwin Silber signed on a few months later as "cultural editor" (he had earlier published the folk music magazine Sing Out) and eventually became the paper's political guru. The "new Guardian" declared itself to be part of the "Maoist-Leninist" movement. This was, of course, de rigueur in New Left radical circles at the time, as even English professors were waving Mao's Little Red Book. In the absence of a genuine popular front and lacking an established Stalinist party in the U.S. to identify with, the distinction between vanguard party and "progressive" fellow traveler was unclear. In actuality, the basic nature of the Guardian tendency did not change, as subsequent developments showed.

In the wake of the 1968 split in SDS, the various Maoist tendencies and collective regroupings themselves into competing "M-L" vanguards: Komsky's October League, Avakian's Revolution ary Union, Peery's Communist League. (Indeed, many of the Guardian's new staff members soon departed on their own "party" projects, such as the National League for Peace, including the Spartacist League.) But the Guardian's role in all this was to maintain that such "party-building" formations were "premature." The more serious Maoists in the early 1970s were not especially concerned with Silber & Co.'s positions on the nature of the Soviet Union, the power struggles in China, the black question, etc.—positions which were ill-defined, tentative and changeable. What Silber was known for, what he was really "hard about", was opposition to the formation of any Leninist vanguard party.

This was not simply a matter of dilettantism or personal softness. From its inception as the voice of the Progressive Party, the Guardian has been the expression of American popular socialism par excellence. Silber himself left the Communist Party together with the right-wing opposition led by Daily Worker editor John Gates. The Gateites concluded on the basis of Khrushchev's "secret report" to the CPSU 20th Congress and the 1956 Hungarian Revolution not only that Stalinism was bankrupt, but the future lay in Democratic Party liberalism. Silber's Guardian looked forward to the creation not of a communist vanguard party, but rather of a broad "radical" party embracing even left-wing bourgeois politicians (analogues of Henry Wallace) and trade-union bureaucrats, as well as self-styled "Leninists.

So what are Irwin Silber's credentials for leading a "Maoist-Leninist" organization? Far and away the most important thing about him is that for years he has passed himself off as a "Maoist-Leninist," but for the past quarter century has made a science of out of "traveling"—first with "Uncle Joe," Nikita Khrushchev, and then Mao and now once again back to Brezhnev.

"Rectification" versus "Fusion"
The Guardian's popular-frontist opposition to a would-be Leninist vanguard party created a natural bloc between it and various localized New Left Maoist collectives—such as the PWOC, the Tucson Marxist-Leninist Collective, the Tomitoc Socialism Organization—which for their own particular reasons had stood outside the "party-building" process of the early/mid-70s. This anti-"vanguardism" is the real origin of the trend, whatever positions were developed later on. As we noted in our article "The Maoists United Will Never Be Repeated": "In general those New Left collectives which did not adhere to serious party formations by the end of the movement period committed a material degenereation into hard-core circle-spirit Maoist group. In contrast, ultra-parochialism, extreme hostility to Marxist theory and program and self-segmentation activism became the norm. The very existence of such a collective represented a contradiction. As self-proclaimed 'Marxist-Leninists,' they were formally committed to building a centralized party; in practice they rejected such a formation."—NY Guardian No. 183, 25 November 1977

It is enough to list the political backwater sers where the collectives subsisted—Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Tucson, Eugene, Oregon, etc.—to understand that they are New Left holdovers preserved in a time capsule by their isolation.

But even for these left-wing muggumpers, some form of national ties is useful if only as a pretense to politics. So in February 1978 some 30 PWOC collectives got together under PWOC leader Marcy Farber to form the Organizing Committee for an Ideological Critical Paper, which ran on 18 pages of much-muddled generalities for socialism, for capitalism, for the working class, against the CP; fight racism, sexism/opportunism—plus the obligatory "Trotskyism equals bourgeois imperi­alism" (against Pekinesis running dogs yapping about the "polar bear"), and the real political core: "fusing of the communist movement with the class struggle." In platitude inherited from the past, it is enough to list the political backwater sers where the collectives subsisted—Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Tucson, Eugene, Oregon, etc.—to understand that they are New Left holdovers preserved in a time capsule by their isolation.

1978:

Vietnam: the final straw

China invades Vietnam. Silber resents the "betrayal" to Moscow.

1981:

End the war in Indochina.

1988:

First issue of the Vietnamese "new" "independent" Guardian marks the shift to Maoist/New Left radical politics. Without a popular front the Guardian traveled with the popular.
The Anti-Klan Network doesn't fight fascism

"New strategies" trumpets the conference call of the "National Anti-Klan Network" (NAKN) for the meeting in Washington, D.C. last October 27.

But what is the strategy of NAKN "to counter the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and racist violence"? It is a very old strategy in fact, a very treacherous existence has proved it can only stand in the way of efforts to actually stop the rise of racist and fascist movements, with increasing boldness and frequency from one era to another.

The Anti-Klan Network's grand strategy, like the strategy of the Communist Party (CP), is captured in the slogan "in the struggle with the capitalist bourgeoisie, a struggle to the finish." But then why such an exodus? The leadership of the Stalinist movement, being used to harden up the membership as far back as the 1930s and 1940s, certainly does not doubt intended to divert attention from—or scoot the ranks for—the "anti-fascist" National Anti-Klan Network's new militancy with their low-level economist organizing. It's always worked fine before, but when PWOC tried it the result was a giant fiasco. Newlin asks:

"What kind of communist movement is it that when challenged to combat white terrorism, all the evidence is, the strategy is to lose; when challenged to win, all the evidence is, the strategy is to lose?"

No kind, of course. Behind this so-called "strategy," is the fact that the collectives are not made up of Stalidist cadre but of soft New Leftist types. The public relations arm of the racist, strong-armed tactics are used on these fellow travelers (from the Russian term sparnik), instead of abjectly confessing they will simply just out of orbit. So the attempt to hammer this Menshevik must not only be a popular struggle failed (this sure looks like the death of the OCIC). Newlin asks:

"What kind of a strategy is it: if it loses, it loses; if it wins, it loses, and in the meantime its propaganda disorients, demoralizes and demobilizes the working class?"

The Southern California Anti-Klan Newsletter spells out the strategy:

"To stop Metzger, the government, the Democratic Party, and the Democrats, we must join in a united effort with anti-Klan forces. People--[the leadership] must take a stand against open and institutionalized racism. The Democratic Party should come out for a single organization to face racism and fight it forcefully."

To attempt to fight the Klan through or with the Democratic Party is a recipe for civil war. The Southern California Anti-Klan Newsletter accurately tells the story of the experience of the Potomac Socialist Workers and its area workers committee.

That the Democratic Party was and is instrumental in creating the right-wing tide and the climate for Metzger is not just that it doesn't work. It is not even that it loses! It is that when challenged to face racism, the Democratic Party chooses to "ban the Klan." The Anti-Klan Network actively tried to sabotage them. In San Francisco, the Chicanos and the Nazis "celebrate Hitler's birthday" last April 19 with a rally at the Civic Center. The Spartacist League then initiated a united-front demonstration called for the same time and same place for all who were willing to come out and stop the Hitler-loving scum in their tracks. The Anti-Klan Network said no. They along with the Communists in fact precluded the "anti-Klan/Nazi Coalition," went begging to SF mayor Dianne Feinstein to "ban the Klan" and "forward any attempt to confront the Nazis."

What happened? Some 1,200 trade unionists, socialists and community people came out to the SL-initiated April 19 Committee Against Nazis (ANCAN) demonstration which was endorsed by 35 Bay Area union leaders and nine local unions. ANCAN made sure there were no Nazis marching in SF that day. The "Coalition" held their small "educational" rally blocks away, where they could be sure of staying safe and sound. Later the Coalition was forced by internal pressure to make a damning "self-criticism" at a public meeting in Oakland last July 12.

"We sought the only people who would come to that [the SL-initiated demonstration] were basically the people who may be against racism or fascists. Some others... Now, we may have been wrong... we did not bring in a lot of mass elements to our rally."

"We did have some trouble inside [the Coalition] where the rightist line of a fear of anti-anti confrontation with the Nazis convinced people to stay far enough away. That was a rightist line that we fell to, and that's got to be an honest self-criticism.""

"(continued from page 3)

PWOC/OCC is the more serious role people who went into the OCIC had to create something out of the hodgepodge collectives. But in the last six months OCIC has taken on a more positive internal hemorrhaging as a result of a seemingly bizarre "anti-white chauvinism" strategy. OCIC started an offensive to box back to late-90s New Left guilt-tripping about "white skin privilege". But then why such a strategy? The resignation/expulsion list reportedly includes the entire Tucson, Minneapolis and Eugene, Oregon collective. Fragmentation of the Potomac Socialist Organization, as well as half of the Bay Area Workers Committee call 40 percent all told of OCIC's western region. Newlin recently admitted that "apparently they have had voluntarily quit the PWOC/OCC."

An "Open Letter to the Party Building Movement" signed by 50 plus dissenters denounced Newlin's campaign as a cynical maneuver: "It is employing opportunist methods to whip the cadre onto line and eliminate all opposing views rather than face political struggles. The strategy is to escape before our movement head out."

"White chauvinism" witchhunts have always been part of Stalidist movement, being used to harden up the membership as far back as the 1930s and 1940s. The Southern California Anti-Klan Newsletter states that KKK Klansman Tom Metzger campaigned for the anti-Klan vote in Los Angeles, chanting "Democratic Party victory means Fascism defeated." The Ocic newsletter says in its analysis of the Seventh World Congress of the Spartacist League, "Terrorism of the Stalinists is a strategy for reliance on the capitalist bourgeoisie under Dem­

...There are two sharply different answers... The leader­ship of the Stalinists and the social-democratic parties had already passed to the right, the capital­ist leadership of the Stalinists and the social-democratic parties had already passed to the right, the capital­ist bourgeoisie under Demi­

...There are no significant restraint on the growth and reproduction of capitalism in Poland, nor do we find that a new bourgeoisie...
Theoretical Review, November-December 1980

In contrast, a Line of March spokesmen say "in the present time, the Vietnam war is a defensive war for the survival of the USSR and Poland, because the memory of the revolution in the USSR still exists. These dissidents, who occasionally show up in Red Square really don't need the KGB to repress them. A lot of them are there for what they are: the pro-imperialist ones—simply traitors.

Targeting the Communists

There are other pressures. Things are getting hot in the U.S.—people are getting shot. Greenboro—the acquittal of these Nazi medics gives them the green light. Detroit [November 10] and [San Francisco] April 9—we were very close. About those demonstrations, we intended to march. We were quite prepared to take 400 or 500 arrests in New Left titles. And when we have a confrontation—not an adventure, but a confrontation with the Nazis in the Bay Area, of course we want them marching in San Francisco on April 9.

The things are getting more serious than they have been in the past. A sign of the times, of the rightward shift: so you can see that there's a difference between right and left. All across the country we're hearing that.

In Detroit that was a failure. In Wayne State in a room that the SYL—the Spartan Youth League, our youth section—was going to have a forum in the next day. It was written on the blackboard, "Spartacist Revolution 1979." In any case, it was a failure, and a piece of Carter or somebody like that, some bourgeois notable, was physically defend the Spartacist. The student newspaper simply printed a story giving an account of this stunt that was a patent attempt to mislead the audience.

Then in L.A., the Daily Bruin, there was a letter to the editor of the Daily Bruin that was written by some anarcho—first ran and raved about PL, the RCP, the Spartan Youth League and new groups and that the California attorney general has to say, "If you know, you know, it's possible we're in here, but we didn't believe it. We got a copy and we sent it to the paper."

This is a report on "Organized Crime in California, 1979," by the California attorney general, George Deukmejian. And presumably it's supposed to deal with organized crime. But it is something that is devastating. It is a report on II. Terrorism: Summary, Political Terrorism, Prison Gangs in California, Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs—this is the company we're in: the Manson, the S.L.A., Hell's Angels, Mexican Mafia, the Aryan Brotherhood.

Presumably this is the sort of stuff that the lieutenants in the LAPD read before they brief their guys about what we're dealing with the demonstration we called. And it's not even a "subversives" list. This is a list of organizations that are here: SWP, CP.... It's essentially an

Reagan Years...

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Catholic church. It reflects the fact that the present Polish state did not come about through an indigenous revolution, but through a foreign intervention with the baggage trains of the Red Army. It was imposed from the top down. The interference of the USSR and Poland, because the memory of the revolution in the USSR still exists. These dissidents, who occasionally show up in Red Square really don't need the KGB to repress them. A lot of them are there for what they are: the pro-imperialist ones—simply traitors.

has been created which holds state control of the economy; and that, in no way, minimizes the enormous growth in bureaucracy in the USSR, how do you get from there to the mass community? The official line is that the state is the bulwark of the economy away of the state? The authors admit that their "break-through" pamphlet leaves out the "theoretical functional role of the Soviet Union" and that it doesn't represent a fully developed line on the Soviet Union. One way or another, that this is not capitalist, something the bourgeoisie has known ever since 1917, they say it's just not right. Trotsky's analytical conclusion—that the paper support the former imperialists, the plutocrats, very unpopular. How do you get from the vague hope that some element in the Russian or Chinese bureaucracy will "rectify itself." Sort of a reverse stars and stripes! That's why we call them the "days of Stalin and Beria, minus the errors," of course. They don't fight for a communist party to put an end to the capitalist state; they aren't for a communist party to carry out an anti-bureaucratic political rectification in the Stalinist East. The Socialists, the Socialists, the Stalinists, simply put out a publication, hold fora, publish papers and do a few study projects: just a base to pressure the middle. They can't use a revolution anymore. They have to use something different. They cannot study the history of the Third International without examining the Stalin years and Trotsky years. And this they seek above all to avoid. A party flies from program, and it is the revolutionary program of Trotskyism they refuse to confront.

Trotskyism: The Only Answer

While generally preferring to disapprove contemporary Trotskyism, the Socialists are nonetheless forced to concede that Trotskyism has been a "vital" force in the anti-revisionist movement in Russia, and he makes the obvious point: in Russia and the other newly-independent countries of the Soviet Union.