

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MASS STRIKE

In recent months, the Mass Strike Organizing Committee (MSOC) has been engaged in sharp internal struggle over the need to work out programs and principles which the group could support in a disciplined fashion. Our struggles around the history of the communist movement and the role of the communist party culminated in an expression of political solidarity with the Spartacist League (SL). This paper is intended as a brief analysis of the development of the MSOC leading up to this decision, and an evaluation of past weaknesses and errors which prevented us from taking this step sooner. It is a summary of our major experiences in the MSOC, and our development as Marxists-Leninists.

The Mass Strike (MS) was initiated as an extremely modest newspaper, and grew to become a very modest organization; no more than that. The two comrades who initially began publication of the MS had previously common political experience over a number of months. They participated in several formations which emerged from the growing crisis, and then split, in SDS, taking a working class line, but supporting neither side after the split. After a series of failures, both in forming political collectives, and then work-place-organizing-groups, the MS was an attempt to start at the bottom with what was left. (Most of the comrades from the earlier formations either left politics altogether, or abandoned the working class.) The paper started out as an amorphous "left" sheet focusing on non-shop issues (mainly out of necessity, i.e., for lack of contact with on the job struggles.) After a period of struggle with members of the Labor Committee, control of the paper was clearly in the hands of the initiators. Towards the fall of 1970 it became clear that the paper needed a consistent political position, and should become the paper of a political formation, rather than a nebulous "left" working class oriented paper. Finally, during the winter (Dec., Jan., '70, '71) we formed the MSOC around a limited political perspective. It became clear in the succeeding months that our limited perspective was not sufficient even to put out a newspaper. We realized that more general political agreement was necessary. Thus the newspaper was put under the control of an editorial committee, and the rest of the group engaged in fairly intense political discussion. This discussion has continued up to the present time.

The MS grew directly out of the New Left. Not only did none of us individuals have any experience in the communist or working class movement, but ~~was~~ we saw ourselves as rejecting, for various reasons, the so-called revolutionary parties with whom we had come into contact; specifically the CP, SWP, and PLP. The former two we saw as reformist, rather than revolutionary; and PLP we saw as having made fundamental mistakes in many areas; for instance, their center-left coalition theory was only a cover for reformism in the trade unions; and now their rejection of the trade unions entirely would leave the working class in the hands of the trade union bureaucrats. And their lack of any real strategy or analysis, and the resulting major shifts on most political issues, we see as dangerous to the development of a revolutionary working class movement. Our recognition of the class struggle, and the fact that the revolution can only be made by the organized working class; and our rejection of the so-called revolutionary parties, left us isolated in the Boston area. The MS was an attempt to break out of that isolation, and as a base from which, and to which, we could attract cadre. Because there was no basic political orientation, additions to the group were made, not on the basis of agreement with a political program, but rather on the basis of a vague "working class perspective". This perspective was expressed in the criterion for membership we had developed, and in the general approach to trade union work as formulated in the paper "Build a Revolutionary Workers Movement" (RWM).

The concepts set forth in the RWM paper had been held by the initiators of the MS in roughly that form since May-August 1969, when they were developed out of discussions in the Labor Study Group. However, until Sept. 1970 there had been little opportunity to put these ideas into effect. With the development of a caucus in the taxi industry, we had an opportunity to put these concepts into practice, and to contrast them to the center-left coalition concepts being put forth by a PL sympathizer. The combination of this experience and the previous theoretical development resulted in the RWM paper. This paper argued for the creation of organizations in the shops and workplaces based on a transitional program and the perspective of class struggle. These would work both inside and outside of the trade unions, depending on the level of struggle attained. This was contrasted with the reliance on simple militancy, and the transitional demands were seen as means of raising class consciousness, as well as attacking the foundations of capitalism. The RWM's were more than simple caucuses, since they would initiate direct action independently if necessary, and would be active both inside and outside the trade union. The RWM proposal was a draft "trade union program" for a cadre group that intended to concentrate on trade union organizing, and not a comprehensive strategy for revolution.

Our own resources, however, were extremely limited and we saw the need to expand our influence by establishing contact with other individuals and groups with whom we might work. Through a series of contacts with the Labor Committee, the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement, a group of Boston city hospital workers, and some women in (Boston) Female Liberation we repeatedly confronted political and programmatic differences which made common work, and eventual recruitment to the MSOC, impossible. Another attempt to overcome our own isolation was the ill-fated United Front Against Imperialism. We attempted to build a common anti-war demonstration with all organized political groupings to the left of the SWP-CP-NPAC-PCPJ coalition, including the SL. However, our real interest was in building a new anti-war coalition separate from the existing movement, based on rank-and-file workers groups, tenants groups, and sympathetic students. Our anti-capitalist, working class program for such a coalition was not incorrect, but our abandonment of the organized anti-war movement was another example of our implicit syndicalist tendency, and a misunderstanding of the tactic of united front. As a result of these repeated failures to break out of our local political isolation we began looking to various parties and other ex-new left groups around the country. And in doing so we realized the absolute essentiality of formulating a more complete political program. Hence we embarked on a summer long course of study, with particular emphasis on the SL's positions, in order to determine how to develop a leadership of the class. Our conclusion was the importance of joining the fight to construct a Marxist-Leninist party NOW, and a subsequent declaration of political solidarity with the SL.

It was through discussion of program and principles-discussion was not carried on in a systematic way until spring- that we came into direct contact with the SL, finding ourselves in basic agreement on those questions we were studying, viz., Women's Liberation, Black Liberation, and the anti-war movement. And we came to see our concept of RWM's as identical to trade union caucuses based on a transitional program and having tactical flexibility, as discussed in the founding document of the Fourth International (Transitional Program.) The similarity of our positions led us to consider some kind of amalgamation. The major hurdles were two; First was the conception we had of the revolutionary party, and our role in the building of such a party; second was the characterization of the SL as a propaganda group. The first question involved substantial political discussions to clear up and accept. The latter was more a case of misunderstanding what is meant. Both points need explaining in some detail.

I. The role of the party: As a direct outgrowth of the "New Left", we were infected by many of the diseases floating around the radical movement. Most important were organizational liberalism and misunderstanding of the central role of theory in the building of a revolutionary communist working class movement. This was expressed in many ways. First, we did not argue out differences within the group. For instance, some of us ~~were~~ ^{were} Trotskyists, and some leaned towards Stalinism. This was never argued out, for at the time it would have meant splitting the group. This same thing happened with the discussion of a labor party. This was continually put off for the same reasons. In part this was a misunderstanding of the role of theory, expressing itself in the unwillingness to struggle politically for fear of a split. Part of the reason was organizational liberalism. This organizational liberalism also meant sloppiness in our daily work. Group discipline was not enforced, and criticism of various peoples work, when given, was not taken seriously. And our newspaper was not improved to the extent it might have been, partially through lack of discipline, and partially through insufficient criticism and modification of articles. This organizational liberalism was directly related to the concept we had of the MSOC, and its relationship to the building of the revolutionary party. Even though we saw the need for such a party, we clearly did not think that we were its core. We were just not taking our activities seriously, putting off the building of a party to some later time, and even then, our formulation of how that might happen was vague. We realized that it would involve fusion with other groups, but had no idea how this fusion might be accomplished. The necessity for theory was played down. We saw the winning of a significant group of working class militants to a vague commitment to communism and agreement with a general program based on current issues as a pre-condition for the formation of a party. This is contrary to the Leninist concept of a party as first and foremost the embodiment of revolutionary theory and of socialist consciousness, which it brings to the working class. Our non-recognition of the role of theory did not mean it was impossible for us to accomplish some good work, but our whole approach was necessarily based on empiricism, which would inevitably have broken down in any crisis- a methodology for a rear-guard, not a vanguard party. And this would have led to opportunism as we tried to succeed in our mass work, and thus submerged our political principles. In spite of all our talk about the necessity for a party, and the subjective realizations that it was necessary, what we were doing could only have bred syndicalist illusions, especially among those we were trying to propagandize. This tendency, along with our rejection of the central role of theory, led us to believe that we could have some real influence on the direction of ~~the~~ ^{the} New Left groups around the country. We related to them because we had come out of the same movement, with similar backgrounds, rather than out of the necessity to develop revolutionary theory and to build the revolutionary party. Our workerism, because of its complete separation from a revolutionary party, destined to become syndicalist.

Part of our rejection of the leading role of the party (rejection in practice if not in theory) and of the importance of theory in the development of a revolutionary working class movement, was a misconception of what theory is. We had little conception of a logically coherent and comprehensive revolutionary strategy--such as that worked out in the first four congresses of the Communist International, and in the founding document (Transitional Program) of the Fourth International. We saw the necessity of our program extending somehow from the contradictions in the nature of capitalism, and that program and theory had to be consistent. But we did not recognize the necessity of that theory having a consistent organizational form. The revolutionary party is the organizational expression of this revolutionary theory. It is for this reason that the roots of the party are important, and that historical and methodological questions are most important in the development of a revolutionary party. Our acceptance of the role of theory, and the role of the party; and our rejection of the organizational liberalism that was a hold-over from the new left (as had been our implicit rejection of theory) was the major ideological hurdle we had to leap. General acceptance of the tactic of regroupment, as expressed by the SL, was the result of this. The recognition of the necessity of building the revolutionary party, opened our way towards entry into the SL.

II. The SL as a propaganda group: The MSOC was founded on the necessity for mass work. It was our feeling that the concept of a propaganda group contradicted this necessity, especially in the trade unions. We saw the SL, in nearly all of its propaganda, aiming at the left--at students or already conscious members of the working class, (few as they are). The SL had no mass press, no regular newspaper. We saw this as a political mistake, as a result of the propaganda group orientation. We discovered, however, that our conception of what a propaganda group is was wrong. SL members too, desired a mass, regular, press; and it was personnel, rather than political questions which kept it out of existence. We discovered that the SL was indeed doing trade union work, patiently and seriously, the only way that would eventually be able to build communist trade union fractions, and a communist trade union movement. The SL was building in order to win, not for the sake of a few newspaper headlines. Because of the size of the SL, it is necessary that the amount of work being done in this area is small, and the the primary concern must be to winning new cadre. The amount of mass work in itself is not sufficient to win new people, and it is ridiculous to suppose that a small group like the SL could win new people on the basis of its supposed leadership of the class. This could only build cynicism, not revolutionary communism. Being a propaganda group does not mean ignoring mass work; what it is is a recognition of our size and power. Not to be a propaganda group is to be a mass agitational party thus being able to lead sizeable sectors of the class, if not the working class as a whole. A propaganda group is an organization that is trying to grow until it has the size and experience to be able to do this.

Through discussions with leading cadre of the SL, we saw that whenever possible, within the limits of personnel and the acceptance of the program by the masses, the SL would try to lead, at least sections of the class in struggle. However, we feel that some of our misunderstanding was the result of the statements in "Development and Tactics" that read "For us work in the mass movements has little value unless it has exemplary character," and "most important serve to focus and concretize our propaganda line," and as "a demonstration of our seriousness." (p.5) We feel that the correct policy would add the qualifying statement: "(exemplary both to the left and to the working class as a whole)"; and reword it to state: "involvement in the mass movements...which serve to focus and concretize our propaganda line, and, whenever possible, within the limits of personnel and the acceptance of our program by the masses, to attempt to lead at least sections of the class in struggle."

W see that mass work, carefully chosen and directed, is a necessary element in the building of the revolutionary party.

The MS experience, judged as a whole, was a half way house between new leftism and communism. Our errors, mostly concerning our relationship to the building of a revolutionary party, and our implicit rejection of theory, and of the party as the organizational form of that theory, showed up particularly in our practice, which our programs reflected a more conscious communist orientation. Thus while we professed the necessity of a party, our practice leaned towards syndicalism and a rejection of the necessity for the building of the party NOW. Because it was a half-way house, and thus did not reflect a coherent strategy or theory, the MSOC was inherently unstable. It either had to fuse with a more developed communist formation, or split and disappear. In order to have developed a program, we would have had to isolate ourselves from the rest of the movement, But nothing besides the necessity for mass work then held us together, and isolation would have made this impossible. At the same time it was impossible for us to learn through struggle with other tendencies, for, lacking a program, we had nothing to struggle around. Thus further development as an independent organization was, for us, impossible. But it was also undesirable since we found ourselves in political agreement with the SL, it would be impossible to explain, even to ourselves, why we should remain independent of them.

Thus, on the basis of agreement with the political principles of the SL, and with the fundamental programmatic and theoretical positions of the SL, as well as the recognition of the errors of the MSOC and the misconceptions we had, both about the role of theory, and the role of the party as the organizational form of that theory, we in the MSOC have decided that joining the SL and helping to build the revolutionary party is the only step consistent with revolutionary communism. It is this step we must now take, and it is for this reason that we seek fusion with the SL, and acceptance as members into the SL.

Appendix #1-- Adopted from original tendency document (19 August)

Although the word 'regroupment' did not enter MSOC jargon until the current struggle over orienting to Spartacist, we have always had an implicit regroupment perspective. Else, why discuss a possible MSOC trip around the country to spread the MSOC program? However, there are key errors separating this implied MSOC perspective from what we (and SL) consider to be the correct regroupment strategy.

The MSOC conception had two sides to it. On the one hand there was the nation that we had as our responsibility--which we do- to lead the working class; for Mass Strikers this meant jumping headlong into 'mass work' and to develop a program later. All of us now see the inadequacies of this approach. Yet to be quite clear, there is needed not simply a fully-developed trade union program, but a full revolutionary program: the SL program, to pose the question fully. Mass work of any sort cannot be effectively carried out unless the ranks of the revolutionary cadre are themselves in order, aware of the priorities, national and international, for the communist movement, aware of their heritage, their strategic tasks and tactical possibilities. Without this, which is to say, without a party, 'mass work' can only mean jumping willy-nilly into the factories for the sole sake of, in fact, jumping willy-nilly into the factories, without a centralized and coherent set of priorities and unified action nation (and world) wide. This, obviously, is not the supplying of leadership to the proletariat.

Regardless of the subjective impulses of certain cadre, this sort of approach, when successful, could only breed syndicalist illusions among the masses. Though the intentions of the initiators might be to use this approach to build a party, their following would have no organic link to any arena of struggle outside the workplace, and even there not be part of a nationally-or internationally- coordinated strategy. And being, after all, determines consciousness. Thus the 'workerism' of the MSOC is ultimately a syndicalist deviation.

Dark and distant tales, nicely denounced but without real relevance? Hardly. Although the MSOC has on occasion spoken informally of such regroupment tactics as the trip around the country, there has never been a serious discussion of regroupment strategy. Therefore, one cannot cite MSOC documents on the subject; rather, we have only the semi-official doctrine of frequently-repeated catch phrases to inspect. But these provide us concrete illustrations of both kinds of errors.

For example, all our utopian talk of 'bringing together' the scattered and dispersed remains of the New Left are folly. Together--around what? Trade union perspectives? And in what? At best, only a NAC-style federation of local 'collectives' could result. When we finally discussed the matter, we ourselves realized the utopianism of such an approach. The New Left has passed into history. The corpse stinks--let's bury it, have done, not try to resurrect the damn thing. To pose such utopianism as an alternative to entering the SL, whose politics are by all accounts the best we've seen, is dead-end sectarianism and incredible (if not unusual) cynicism.

Another example is our perennial discussion of the newspaper. On the matter of press policy, recall Lenin's What Is To Be Done?, in which he argues the need not for local papers, but for a nationwide mass rev-

olutionary organ distributed in all localities. For this, as for everything else, we must have a party. Furthermore, plots to fire the imagination of the masses through a good local newspaper, an improved Mass Strike, are not alternatives to entering the Bolshevik formation. Regardless of the importance of any segment of mass work, or of the combined importance of all segments, mass work is subordinate to the party. This alone guarantees that the vanguard shall be able to effectively lead the class. Placing mass work above the party (as did one MSOC'er in attempting to pose certain conditions for press policy as terms of his entry in SL) is simply that same old 'pro-party' (ha!) Mass Strike syndicalism.

The correct approach to regroupment overcomes both of these possible deviations. In our opinion, the construction of the revolutionary party to lead the proletariat is the primary task. Therefore, emphasis must fall on actual party building; the development of a full transitional program, the training of cadre in democratic centralism, and the tempering of comrades for orderly trade union work around a coherent set of priorities.

For this the MSOC has proven itself incapable. Even were the Mass Strike to right its past wrongs, it would be but a localized, isolated, mini-Spartacist. Independent existence would then only serve to throw up organizational barriers preventing entry on the basis of political agreement, into Spartacist. This we must not allow.

We have all, through the MSOC gained valuable experience and something of a Marxist-Leninist education. It is high time now to step out of our isolation, our mediocrity, our errors-and advance into the struggle for the construction of the revolutionary communist party. What we have learned in the Mass Strike we must now put to use, as disciplined adherents of a nationally implemented transitional program. We must join the Spartacist League.