

CPA Discussion Page

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Why Marxist-Leninist Path Was Lost

By MAX STEINBERG

We American Communists were jarred to a sharp turn in our thinking by Comrade Duclos and his criticism of our policies. It is now becoming increasingly clear that by characterizing monopoly capital as progressive, by our failure to base our policies on American labor, which is the main progressive force in the nation and whose interests are opposite to, and clash with the interests of capitalism, we departed from the path of Marxism-Leninism.

We must ask ourselves: how did we come to depart from these basic theories? Surely, we are loyal to the working class. We are tirelessly struggling against fascism, we are convinced that Marxism is the correct path for the working class and for humanity. We studied Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin for many years. Yet with the exception of Comrade Foster, none of us was able to apply these theories in life when we needed them most. The answer, in my judgment, is that we were influenced in our thinking by the policies of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie, in their efforts to maintain hegemony over the workers and win their good will, resorted to demagoguery. It also granted concessions to the masses. Unfortunately, we did not understand the character of these concessions. We, too, fell victims to their demagoguery. We developed the theory of the progressive role of monopoly capitalism in the present world situation. Our policy led to pacifying the workers and encouraging their reliance on the bourgeoisie, instead of preparing them for struggles.

Because of a new relationship of forces in the world, it was more important than ever to keep Marxism as our guide to action. We should have foreseen that a victory over Nazi Germany would sharpen the capitalist contradictions. Instead, we based our policies on a rejuvenated capitalism, which would solve the problems of the nation and the world, along progressive lines.

During this war we directed our attack against the openly pro-fascist groups. But we ascribed to the

monopoly capitalists who were supporting the war the same motives that actuated the people, whereas in fact, the people were fighting against fascism, while the bourgeoisie, even though raising humanitarian slogans, was fighting their imperialist rival who threatened to dominate the world. With the defeat of Hitler their true objectives came to the fore. As in the early stages of capitalist development when capitalism played a historically progressive role, they raised slogans of freedom and equality, in order to win the working class as their allies. After gaining power, they betrayed these slogans and began to oppress the proletariat. If this was true in the early stage of capitalism, how much more true is it in the period of imperialism?

Engels, in dealing with these historic developments, points out that the working class holds the bourgeoisie to its word and continues to fight for real freedom and equality. We, on the contrary, developed the theory that after this war the working class, instead of fighting for the realization of the peoples' war slogans and the Teheran agreement, can depend on the monopolists.

We began to rely on the intelligence, wisdom, good will and national loyalty of the monopolists. We concluded that the alliance between the United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union, irrespective of the strength of labor and the people's forces in our country, guarantees a peaceful solution to national and world problems. How could we then hope to be able to mobilize the people effectively for action on Greece, on Argentina, on Italy, Trieste, Poland, or on the issue of independence of colonial peoples, or on home issues?

The Teheran Concord, something entirely new in world relationships, instead of becoming an objective to

fight for with Marxism as our guide, itself became our guide.

This policy affected our approach to our own organization. Millions of new workers from new sections of the population, inexperienced in the labor movement, with many prejudices, entered war industry. It was most important for the advanced workers, the Communists who are trained in struggle for the organization of their unions, to educate these new sections of the working class to the meaning of class relations and of the role of labor. Precisely at the time when we should have mobilized all our forces to help these new people become assimilated into the working class ranks, we dissolved our shop organizations.

We dissolved our party, and formed an educational association instead. We now begin to realize that during all this time we were learning how not to apply Marxism in our work. Our organization suffered greatly as a result. The majority of our members are active in unions and other peoples' organizations. They have been doing excellent work among the masses. We found, however, a relative passivity among them towards our organization. Our members didn't see much difference between us and the progressive organizations. Many of them chose the mass organizations in preference to our association.

Our community clubs found themselves in the greatest difficulties ever encountered in our organization. While our members were more active than ever as members of mass organizations, the activity of our clubs and participation of our members as Communists in community affairs was greatly reduced. We repeatedly made demands on our club leadership which they could not fulfill. We developed all sorts of organizational ideas arising out of our theoretical errors, such as the theory of three types of members; active ones, semi-active ones, and passive ones.

Our lack of reliance on the work-

ing class had to lead to lack of Thus, instead of exerting efforts to draw our members into discussions on policy and club activity in such a way that their political initiative would come into play in shaping policy, deciding on activity and the solving of problems which would invigorate our organization, we developed the idea of three types of members which takes for granted a small number of actives. We dissolved the leading committees in the sections—that were closest to our clubs and our members, and we centralized the leadership in the counties. Our club meetings were narrowed down. Our steady contact with the club membership was weakened.

We took this problem up many times. We were never able to solve it. We would finally say to one another that this is not an organizational problem, that it is a political matter, that our members do not clearly see the role of our association. That much we would say. But we did not go a step and critically examine the role of our association, to really establish what is our vanguard role and explain it to our members and to ourselves.

Our present discussion must lead to an immediate correction of our organizational mistakes, particularly with regard to industrial organization. This is most urgent if we are to meet the serious tasks ahead. And we must, above all, formulate such a program of action that will lead to an increased amount of initiative of our Communist organization and the working class to develop the broadest kind of labor and peoples' anti-fascist unity around domestic issues and for the enforcement of the Teheran agreement in international affairs. We made great contributions to the military defeat of fascism. By once again placing the main emphasis on the role of organized labor and its allies in struggle against all manifestations of fascism, we are now embarking upon a course that will make our contributions of greater value to our class and our people, reliance on our members as well.

Must Build Solidly Among Working Class

We American Communists made the errors we did because we failed to build ourselves solidly among the working class. Our members and our leaders are still mostly middle class. Actually, in the last four years we have lost many more typical workers in mass industry than we have gained in new recruits.

This fact has always worried me, but I never did much about it. Unfortunately, it took the Duclos article and the National Board Resolution to wake me up to the full danger of this situation.

The great growth of the American labor movement during the past 10 years should have seen at least a proportionate growth of the Communist movement among the workers. When this did not happen, instead of facing it as a basic weakness in our organization, we made excuses. The main excuse was that the workers didn't have the same "fighting mood" as in the early 1930's. But we helped to develop this "fighting mood" against unemployment and starvation wages; and we should later on have developed a "fighting mood" for national unity and for the war against fascism, and—for Teheran. These excuses were just a cover for our refusal to face the alarming fact that the workers were not joining our movement while they were joining the mass trade unions in millions.

I believe now that the roots of our errors go quite a few years back. We have been satisfied to rest on our achievements (which have been considerable) and not to face certain weaknesses, such as:

1. While contributing a great deal to the historic growth of the trade unions, we did not fight hard enough for the recognition of the Communists therein.
2. In the fight for Spain, we mobilized liberal middle class circles, but we did a poor job among the workers generally. The same was true in the fight for collective security.
3. While effectively aiding the war effort, we have not succeeded in explaining to the workers how this war differs from the imperialist war of 1914-1918, and thus we have not restrained, and possibly encouraged, sentiments of national chauvinism.

The only way we can hope to avoid more serious errors in the future will be by building our organization among the workers. There is a general feeling now of the importance of studying Marxist-Leninist theory, and, of course, that is right. However, important though it is to study the past experiences of the working class movement through the writings of Marx, Lenin and others, unless we also absorb the present experiences of the workers into the heart of our organization, we'll just be bookworms.

The National Board Resolution by correcting our political outlook will make possible some immediate improvement in our ties with the workers. I think the National Convention should also take some organizational measures along the following lines:

1. Our whole organization, led by the National Board, shall undertake a serious recruiting drive among workers in basic industry.
2. Within one year of the convention at least 50 percent of our full time functionaries shall be recent industrial workers or veterans who were industrial workers before their induction.
3. Within one year after the convention at least one-third of the full-time National Board members shall be recent industrial workers or trade union leaders.

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Wants Draft Sharpened on Class Struggle

We, who have insistently preached democracy, now find ourselves in the midst of a discussion which clearly shows us that in recent years, at least, we have not practiced what we were preaching.

Democratic centralism! Magic words, that mean we, the rank and file have a voice in helping to plan political activities as well as carrying forward the tasks that our leaders have planned. And yet, like a thunderbolt, we were struck with the realization that our leadership had not trusted in the judgment of the rank and file members.

They presented to us a program that dissolved the independent political party of the working class, called for a cessation of the class struggle for an indefinite period and turned us into an indecisive organization, whose role differed very little from those of other progressive groups. They presented this program as the unanimous decision of our national leadership. They did not have the faith in us, in our opinions and decisions to also present to us Comrade Foster's opposition to their "unanimous" point of view. This was sheer bureaucracy.

"Lenin taught us not only to teach the masses but also to learn from them." This is what the world's foremost Marxist, Joseph Stalin, said.

He also added, "That our experience, the experience of leaders, is insufficient to give correct leadership; that, consequently, it is necessary that one's experience, the experience of leaders, be supplemented by the experience of the masses, by the experience of the rank and file

party members, by the experience of the working class, by the experience of the people. To lead correctly means first, to find a correct solution of the question. But a correct solution cannot be found unless account is taken of the experience of the masses who test the results of our leadership on their backs. We leaders see things, events and people from one side only: I would say from above. Our field of vision consequently, is also to a certain degree limited. To receive a correct solution, to the question these two experiences must be united. Only in such a case will a leadership be correct." This is applied democratic centralism!

The bureaucratic handling of important political policies, the great display of lack of faith in the judgment of our rank and file membership by our leaders is what struck me most forcibly.

The immaturity of the American Communist is apparent to all. We preached Marx and Lenin, we used the correct phraseology, but when it came to policy, we formed our own "Marxism" that made it easy for us to work during a difficult period. That told us to extend a hand of friendship to the timeless enemy of the working class, imperialism. A "Marxism" that told us that the capitalists would double our wage scale because they would want ALL of us to have prosperity, that they would work with us to win the war against Fascism, and would also cooperate with us to win a prosperous and enduring peace. A "Marxism" that said that three

men, representing imperialism and socialism met and put their signatures to the Teheran Concord with equal possibilities of keeping their faith with each other and with their respective interests. That imperialism would henceforth trust the socialist country and keep faith with it. That disregarded the basic contradictions between imperialism and socialism.

We were presented with a program called "Teheran," a new "Marxism" that said we should not strive for socialism because at this period the majority of the American people didn't want it—that capitalism had decided to live in peace with the one socialist state—and that we no longer needed to struggle against capitalism. A "Marxism" that distorted the class struggle, and turned us into a wishy-washy progressive organization to "educate" the people to our way of thinking.

This program was presented with such logic, such brilliance of presentation that everyone of our American leaders were drugged into believing this program to be correct. They told us this revisionism was honest application of working class principles, but that we could not find its lesson in Lenin, because such an historical period had no precedent. By questioning "Teheran," or doubting the sincerity of the signatories, we defeated the possibilities of its realization. There was no room for disapproval.

Serious mistakes have been made before by other great Marxist leaders. Immediately on realization of the error of their ways they delved