

PL AT A DEAD END

The Progressive Labor Party stands today a subjectively revolutionary organization bankrupt in its guiding conceptions, its prestige at a low ebb as the result of years of left-right-left shifts on virtually all major questions. This state of affairs must be apparent to the more perceptive of PL's membership and periphery despite efforts to cover the confusion by optimistic bombast. By 1968 it was evident that PL, burned by disasters such as Algeria and Indonesia, had awkwardly abandoned its orthodox Stalinist-Maoist approach to nationalism and, however much seeking to delay the reckoning, stood estranged on major issues from its mentor, the Chinese Communist Party. Referring to PL's empirical rejection of aspects of Stalinist opportunism, the Spartacist League in June 1969 termed PL's course "Trotskyism with a pre-frontal lobotomy." Recently the sharpness of the choice facing PL—to opt for genuine Leninism-Trotskyism or spiral into a rejection of Leninism as it repudiates Lenin's betrayers—becomes clearer as PL flounders over the question of the trade unions and mass work.

Only a short time ago, a hallmark of PL was "base-building" in mass and especially union work. Crude as its "base-building" concept was, PL fought hard against groups which regarded the working class as inherently reactionary (such as the RYM-Weatherman splitters in SDS) and against the Labor Committee's orientation of endless mass leafleting campaigns from outside. Now, however, PL is furiously emphasizing "mass sales" of *Challenge* rather than systematic colonizing into unions while professing that any PLers in factory situations will work as "open communists." Earlier, PL's main union policy revolved around the same concept as that of Browder's CP: the "left-center coalition" strategy—in practice an alliance with left-talking would-be bureaucrats and their hangers-on.

Dual Unionism Implicit

The Campus Worker-Student Alliance (CWSA) line, pushed in SDS by PL supporters to the exclusion of virtually all other arenas of struggle, was implicitly abstract propagandist in nature. PL-SDS refused to call for unionization of campus workers or to deal politically with unions when the workers were organized. Frightened by the rapidly revealed reformist content of the only trade union policy it knew, PL sought to become more "revolutionary" by holding itself aloof from the scene of its demonstrated opportunism—the unions—through the abstentionist, implicitly dual-unionist CWSA. The concentration on campus workers provided PL with an additional advantage: while

the plight of oppressed campus workers helped win class-guilt-ridden students, the CWSA was also an activity in which PL's opportunist errors and the triviality of its demands would not damage its reputation as seriously as the same errors in a union-organized, more politically conscious and economically powerful sector of the class engaged in industrial production.

PL-SDS has now downgraded the CWSA strategy but continues to denounce as "elitist" the idea that SDS should bolster its material support to workers (e.g. UAW strikers) with explicit programmatic demands to assist in crystallizing militant left-wing caucuses in the unions. SDS is unable to break from social-workerism (locating the axis of struggle in self-criticism over "individualism," "racism," "male chauvinism") because they lack a program to fight oppression, clinging to support of the bourgeois family, opposition to abortion and college "Open Admissions," refusal to be openly socialist, etc.

The CWSA strategy offered no answer to unionized workers seeking to fight within the complex, demanding and confusing arena of their unions. The groundwork was laid for PL to retreat into SLP- or Wobbly-type backwardness, characterized by glorification of the hypothetical apolitical "honest worker" and avoidance of the long-term struggle for leadership within the key trade union arena.

PL does not, of course, proclaim indifference to union struggle. But an organization must retreat from an arena for which it lacks a program. PL explicitly rejects the "Trotskyist" (and Leninist) concept of *transitional program*—which gives communists a bridge between the workers' felt needs for immediate improvement of their lot and the ultimate demand of state power. Lacking such an approach, PL must shuttle impressionistically between the obviously desirable "minimum" demands well understood by all workers (the CWSA's "rubber mats for the cafeteria") and empty ultimatism.

"Historic Penalty for Opportunism"

PL recoils from the results of its "left-center coalition" opportunism and, recently, from its trivial, moralistic CWSA orientation in SDS. But its reaction can be no more than to run

blindly from opportunism. PL is at a dead end in its interpretation of communism; its subjectively revolutionary impulse is at odds with its own history as a left variant of Stalinist-Maoist revisionism. PL has been shoved off its Stalinist base. Two years ago it repudiated its former line of supporting "progressive" nationalism, thus implicitly criticizing the Communist Parties from Stalin to Mao on this fundamental question. Now it stands face to face with the implications of its opportunism toward the unions. Its reaction on both questions is a classic case of sectarianism as opportunism standing in fear of itself. In its confusion, a large section of PL may find *Leninism* as easy to abandon as the Maoist caricature of Leninism, central aspects of which it had already dropped ("New Democracy," the two-stage theory of revolution, peaceful coexistence with reactionary "Third World" regimes, etc.) without Leninist analysis.

PL has taken the same position on elections as the confused anti-opportunists criticized by Lenin in *Left-Wing Communism—An Infantile Disorder*. Lenin saw that ultra-leftism (and anarchism, its "purest" form) was a sort of "historic penalty for opportunism." Though recognizing the impulse which drove some communists away from electoral struggle and activity in reformist-led unions, Lenin was no less quick to point out the result of such a policy—separation from the struggle for the consciousness of the mass of the workers, a mistake which saves inexperienced communists from opportunism *only* because it separates them from real struggle with all its temptations to adaptationism.

For a Political Party of Labor!

To its revolutionary credit, PL does not mimic the pseudo-Trotskyism of the Workers League in calling for a ready-made opportunist Labor Party. But its response is to deny the relevance of a workers' party to the needs of the U.S. working class, replacing a concept of struggle for a real workers' party by the sterile slogan of "the elections are a hoax." Plenty of workers and students have long believed that "you can't fight City Hall," but most people who consider the elections a hoax also believe revolutionary politics are a fraud because of the history of betrayals by self-styled revolutionaries. PL's reject-

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Syndicalism and Leninism

One surprising effect of the French May-June 1968 events has been a resurgence of anarcho-syndicalism within the U.S. left. In fact, the French events completely reaffirmed the fundamental thesis of Lenin and Trotsky: that the mass reformist (Stalinist or social-democratic) party of the working class can deflect even the strongest spontaneous impulses toward revolution, in the absence of a pre-existing revolutionary party with considerable authority in its own right. Precisely what was lacking to carry the French workers

from general strike to taking power was revolutionary *political* organization—a vanguard party. But the New Left drew the conclusion that spontaneous localism is revolutionary and all centralized parties counter-revolutionary. The glorification of spontaneity fit in with classic New Left biases toward “doing one’s own thing,” and variants of syndicalism became the form under which New Left radicals turned toward the working class.

For a syndicalist, the revolutionary

process is supposed to take roughly this character: A wildcat strike creates a strong factory committee, which declares its independence from the official union and establishes e.g. the “liberated area of the Metuchen GE plant.” When enough such “liberated industrial areas” exist they combine and the system is thus overthrown.

However, the existing relatively centralized union structure is not a plot by bosses and union bureaucrats, but a victory gained by long, bitter struggles. Most syndicalists look back to the thirties as the heroic period of U.S. labor, but fail to realize that the main object of the labor struggles of the thirties was the consolidation of atomized factory groups into strong national unions. The principal goal of the great 1936 GM strike was to establish a single union to bargain for the thirty-odd GM plants. Before this, all bargaining was done at the plant-wide level. Some plants were organized, others not; some had localized unions, others had unions with broader aspirations. It was easy for GM to play one plant off against another or to shift production if one plant was particularly troublesome. The auto workers instinctively recognized they would have to give up a degree of local autonomy to achieve any real bargaining power.

Even now, it is the existence of 14 different unions as well as many non-union shops that has allowed GE to walk all over its workers for so many years. The growth of conglomerates has faced a number of unions with greatly reduced leverage.

Form and Content

The existence of strong working-class institutions under capitalism—unions or parties—necessarily creates the *objective* basis for privileged bureaucracy. A sure-fire cure for union bureaucratism is not to have unions at all! The corollary, of course, is that the workers are then completely at the mercy of the bosses. There is no mechanical solution to the problem of democracy. The only answer is an aroused and conscious working class which controls its own organizations, whether these be hundred-man factory committees, unions of hundreds of thousands or mass parties numbering in the millions.

Another important aspect of the syndicalist perspective is what form rank and file opposition should take: union-wide caucuses based on a comprehensive radical program, or attempts to undermine the centralized power of the bureaucracy through factory-level organizations? The goal of socialists in unions is not occasional defiance of

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tion of the workers’ party demand merely *sidesteps* the need to convince workers that revolutionary politics are qualitatively different from capitalist politics and the political cynicism they generate among the masses.

In PL’s pamphlet “The Great Flint Sit-Down Strike Against General Motors 1936-1937” Walter Linder correctly notes that a major consideration preventing Roosevelt from intervening militarily against the strikers was the fear that “*the final result might become a strong case for an independent workers’ party to challenge the ruling-class parties on a higher level. . .*” (p. 121) Apparently the bosses did not believe, as PL now insists, that such a party is simply a trap for the workers! PL does not lead the workers to the Democratic Party as the CP did in the thirties, but neither does it call for a *political* alternative to capitalist politics.

Since PL does not regard a workers’ party as a significant step forward for the workers, one logically can ask what they think of unions. The world’s rottenest Labor Party does not have a more treacherous and pro-capitalist leadership than the American trade union movement. But isn’t union organization, even with its inherent limitations and potential for bureaucratism and co-option, still a gain for the workers? What condemns a workers’ union or party to the leadership of the “labor lieutenants of capital” is precisely the weakness of the revolutionary forces within it. And if communists dare not fight the union fakers for workers’ leadership, how are they ever to go up against the entire bourgeois social order, the capitalist state which hires and fires the bogus leaders of the working class?

“Trotskyism” as Secret Remedy

PL is indeed moving left from many of its previous positions. But, equating Leninism with their own Stalinist tradition and the garbled Menshevism of

Maoism, PL recognizes its mistakes only by threatening to jump “left” past both Lenin and the working class, from opportunism to sterile sectarianism. No amount of ultra-revolutionary rhetoric, no amount of gimmickry or genuine hard work, will compensate for PL’s theoretical confusion.

The only way out of PL’s present bankruptcy is to come to terms with authentic modern Leninism—Trotskyism. PL’s present rejection of key aspects of Stalinist-Maoist revisionism does not substitute for consistent communist program; it merely removes the greatest formal obstacle. PL will either discover the Leninist road in the only tendency—authentic Trotskyism—consistently opposed to the revisionism PL rejects, or reject Lenin along with the usurpers of his mantle and be lost forever in the wilderness of backward sectarianism and political banditry. Often PL seeks to dodge the issue of Trotskyism, sometimes invoking the straw man of the ex-Trotskyist SWP, while adopting particular quasi-Trotskyist positions empirically and without acknowledging their source or wider implications. (Canadian and European Maoists have accused PL of such “Trotskyism,” not without reason.) This is a self-destructive method, ensuring vulgar empiricism and sporadic opportunism. It is the method of those who say they are revolutionaries without acknowledging Marxism—at best a confusion of the inexperienced radical, at worst the device of opportunists to make a left turn while keeping their class options open.

Trotskyism is not an antidote to be taken in small doses by an organism living on a steady diet of Menshevism. Rather it represents the continuation of Bolshevik politics. PLers must understand that PL’s opportunism has been the result not of Leninism, but of pseudo-Leninism, and that its refusal to deal with Trotskyism is at the root of its inability to effectively distinguish the genuine from the revisionist in communist politics. ■