

Proletarian Unity League

2, 3, Many Parties of a New Type? Against the Ultra-Left Line

Chapter 2: The Danger from the "Left"

A. From Sects to Sectarianism

We said earlier that the communist movement arose spontaneously. Its growth took an unsystematic form: literally hundreds of local organizations, collectives, and study circles have grown up, usually composed of one nationality only. Some have fallen apart, but a number have merged to produce larger organizations, a very few national in scope and multi-national in composition. Yet within this general movement, two phenomena stand out: one, after a certain point, the largest organizations did not continue to grow and combine at the same pace as previously; two, small organizations, local collectives, and study groups did, however, continue to mushroom throughout the country, and many of these did not join the national so-called "pre-party formations." (Some in fact formed as split-offs from the largest organizations). Many more Marxist-Leninists currently have no organizational affiliations at all. In other words, the period of spontaneous growth of the communist movement, chiefly among the students and other segments of the intelligentsia, including many activists in the national and women's movements, has not ended. How are we to view this fact?

The largest organizations--meaning the handful that believe their own line has proven in practice that it answers all the major questions of the day--regard spontaneous growth as anachronistic. Pointing to themselves, they argue that the period of smaller organizations is over, and that all honest revolutionaries should rally to one line. ("October League calls for unity on the basis of Marxism-Leninism.") For them the continuing spread of small groups manifests an essentially reactionary narrow circle mentality, corresponding to an earlier period.

That the splintering of the anti-revisionist camp has many grievous consequences hardly needs repeating. Any justification of that splintering, any brief made for maintaining the movement in its disorganized, amateurish state, must be condemned. But unless the real causes of division and sectarianism are laid bare, the communist movement will make no progress in strengthening its revolutionary capacity. And crediting the wrong

causes for our weaknesses means apologizing for the real ones. The complaints of the various parties and pre-parties against small organizations and unaffiliated study circles betray a shallow and one-sided conception of the development of the anti-revisionist movement. Moreover, they convey a self-serving apologetic interpretation of the present sectarianism.

Sects figure inevitably in the beginning of any communist movement and have a somewhat positive function. In emphasizing what distinguishes each from the other, they permit the most varied political and theoretical positions to emerge and contend. In its earliest stages, a movement cannot fear the multiplication of different sects.

Marxists do not encourage debate for its own sake, however, nor grant an equal voice to every position for very long. After the hundred flowers have bloomed, the attentive gardener picks the weeds and cultivates the better stock. In Other words, wide democratic discussion must serve centralization of correct ideas, or else the movement cannot progress, cannot proceed from polemic to politics.

The development of socialist sectarianism and that of the real working-class movement always stand in inverse ratio to each other. Sects are justified (historically) so long as the working class is not yet ripe for an independent historical movement. As soon as it has attained this maturity, all sects are essentially reactionary. (Marx to F. Bolte, Marx and Engels, **Selected Correspondance**, p. 326)

The centralization of correct ideas allows the development of ideological struggle at a higher level. Further, it alone permits the organizational consolidation of the movement.

At this point in the U.S. communist movement, the further multiplication of groups or the maintenance of existing divisions has no historical necessity. Without doubt, sufficient ideological struggle has occurred to serve as the basis for much greater unity than exists today. In this situation, the largest groups (the parties and parties-to-be) could play a dynamic role. Disposing of greater resources, they have the capacity of organizing the ideological struggle and centralizing it in the process. But so far they have given no indication of any willingness to play such a role.

Instead of grappling with the problems of the present period, the largest groups have raced ahead to discover a new one:

“There are many people, who in the course of the last ten years or so, and through their experience in the civil rights and national liberation

movements, the student movement, etc., have studied Marxism-Leninism and who have come to consider themselves communists...They are in small, "independent" collectives or not affiliated with any group at all, and despite all difficulties are continuing in their work. Some are working in factories and doing political work there, others are doing "serve the people" community work, etc., and at the same time are trying to keep up with how things are developing in the movement overall, kind of watching and waiting to see the flow and direction of things.

"But while that might have been a correct position at an earlier time--when our movement was characterized primarily by the development of many independent collectives working in relative isolation from one another, experimenting with this idea or that--it is no longer such a good position to be in as we enter this new period, when it is necessary for these various forces and individuals "to come off the fence," as it were, and actively participate in the crucial ideological and political struggle that is now developing so rapidly within our movement so that we can raise it and the mass struggle to a higher level." **(Red Papers 6, p. 8)**

The October League Third Congress has discovered the same period:

"This early period, marked by the rise of communist collectives, study circles, and local groups, has drawn to a close. A number of national communist pre-party organizations have replaced them, representing a general trend within the young communist movement. Through the struggle against revisionism, and in our work during this pre-party period, consolidated opportunist trends have been exposed and driven from the ranks of this young movement--aliens to Marxism-Leninism, This fight against national chauvinism. Trotskyism, anarchism, syndicalism, and ultra-"leftism" in general has strengthened the movement and set the stage for the organizational formation of the new party." **The Call**. August 1975, p. 11)

Since we have arrived in the "new period," we must "roll on and roll over" those retrograde tendencies which cling to the "old period." "Dump the baggage!" they tell us, and "combat the conservative forces within and outside our ranks who will try to keep us from moving forward!" Yet neither the RU/RCP nor the OL, nor any of the other discoverers has provided any concrete analysis of the characteristics of the "past" period, its tasks, and what demonstrates that these tasks have really been accomplished. In depicting the "end of a period" and the birth of the new one, all the RU explained was that "our movement continues to surge forward, linking up more closely with the masses and scoring significant victories and advances." **(Revolution, May 1974)** We must form the new party since

"there is already enough experience." (**Revolution**, June 1974) The publication of its Draft Programme, the RU said, proved "that the work of RU comrades and all genuine communists has made tremendous advances, that our links with the working class and masses are now much stronger, that the path ahead is now much clearer," and that therefore "the new party...will be forged!" (**Ibid.**, April 1975) For his part, the October League chairman simply declared that "both the objective and subjective factors for party-building have ripened." For the OL Third Congress, the subjective conditions mean "the great advances in the ideological struggle within the communist movement against revisionism and all other forms of opportunism." (**The Call**, August 1975) Of course, in a comparative sense (compared to when the Marxist-Leninist forces numbered only in the several hundreds), the communist movement has made real advances. But have we made the advances necessary to establish a Communist Party worthy of the name?

After wading through the salutations to great advances and the hailing of tremendous victories, we note that those organizations forming parties habitually avoid explaining how we got through the last period. Instead, they pat themselves on the back and announce that because the new period has arisen, things are different, especially them, and the one true Communist Party is at hand.¹

Consider, for example, the OL's description of the current organizational features of the communist movement. The OL claims that "national communist pre-party organizations have replaced" local organizations, collectives, and study circles. As we indicated earlier, this claim does not correspond to the real organizational picture of U.S. Marxist-Leninists. Maybe three organizations actually qualify as "national" in scope--the CLP, the RCP, and the OL. On the other hand, many Marxist-Leninist groups give no sign of having been replaced by the party or pre-party organizations, not to mention the innumerable study circles. Who then does the OL have in mind?

"A number of national communist pre-party organizations have replaced them, representing a general trend within the young communist movement...consolidated opportunist trends have been exposed and driven from the ranks of this young movement." What general trend do the handful of "national pre-party organizations" represent? The CLP, the RU/RCP, and the OL are the only groups approaching national status, and all they could represent is the trend towards voluntarist party formation. If we subtract the RU/RCP and the CLP, which have been "driven from the ranks of this young movement," what general trend is left? Need you ask...

The parties and parties-to-be would have a hard time trying to convince the rest of the movement that they have in fact accomplished the main tasks of the "past" period, and perhaps that is why they never define them concretely. Instead they gesture with alarm at the darkening storm clouds on the horizon which, they claim, make the immediate formation of the Party both possible and imperative:

Klonsky's political report stated that both the development of objective and subjective factors for party-building have ripened. The objective factors include the deepening of the present crisis in capitalism in which all of the basic contradictions in the system are coming to the forefront and bringing thousands of revolutionary-minded workers and oppressed people to Marxism-Leninism. Furthermore, the growing threat of war on the part of the imperialists as well as the increasing fascist threat serve as a warning that the present period of pre-party organizations cannot adequately serve the people's complex and difficult struggle which lies ahead. **(The Call, August 1975)**

But somehow the evidence cited never quite adds up. When no proletariat exists in a country, the objective factors may not have "ripened" sufficiently to permit the formation of a Marxist-Leninist party there. But aside from that specific case, the objective factors can only condition the party-building process, retarding it or speeding it up: they cannot, by themselves, prevent the formation of a Party. Objective conditions determine to a large degree the forces who must in turn build the Party, but party-building itself remains a subjective process. In other words, the "ripening" of the objective factors does not and cannot bring thousands of any class to Marxism-Leninism; only Marxist-Leninists can. Either the October League believes that this task has been accomplished, or else they are gambling on The Crisis radically altering the ideological and political alignment of the working class, and doing things for the OL which they do not have a plan to do themselves, namely, fusing Marxism-Leninism with the workers' movement. Cries that the present pre-party organizations will not "adequately serve" the needs of the new period cannot cover up this basic lack of direction. As anyone familiar with the communist movement knows, the "pre-party organizations" do not "adequately serve the people's complex and difficult struggle" in the present period.

Those who have seen the "new period" tell us that Marxist-Leninist thought works mainly in one direction over there. That direction has different names- the "unity trend" for the OL, the "mighty, irreversible trend" for the WVO, etc.-but in any case it characterizes the new era. The various communist groups who refuse to realize which way the wind blows represent a bygone period. Their Rightist longing for the good old days holds them back.

Obviously, the "new period" works best if you do not clutter it up with a lot of troublesome facts. For in fact, just this side of the new period, no unified direction for the communist forces has emerged. The multiplication of parties, pre-parties, and other groups belies these rosy declarations. The larger groups have not **organized** or given a plan to the growth of the anti-revisionist movement. Continued spontaneous growth results in even further decentralization of command and a still more anarchic division of labor. Nor have the larger groups made significant gains among the working class. The dominant class composition of the Marxist-Leninist forces remains the same.

Without doubt, the sharpening social crisis within the U. S. makes it urgent that Marxist-Leninists put an end to the period of spontaneous growth of many small groups. The lack of connections between groups, the necessarily amateurish nature of their work, security, and organization, and the primitive level of ideological struggle which they can support all point to the need for a centralized direction for the communist movement. But that direction can only emerge through making decisive headway on the current tasks of the **present** party-building period. **The failure to achieve sound advances on these tasks accounts for the persistence of "earlier" organizational forms.** Owing principally to the ultra-left assumptions impeding their work, the parties and parties-to-be have not assimilated historical materialism and dialectical materialism in a thoroughgoing way, nor have they developed historical materialism in order to take account of our specific conditions. Though some have won over politically active workers to communism, sometimes in not insignificant numbers, the OL and RU/RCP in particular have tended to pass over this task in favor of mass agitation and "mass action." For the most part they lack the advanced workers whose activity forms an indispensable part of winning over the proletarian masses. Therefore various more primitive organizational forms continue, dedicated to and to some extent appropriate for these tasks.

"Propaganda in the study circles can be conducted by men and women who have no mutual contact whatever with one another and who do not even suspect one another's existence; it goes without saying that the lack of organization always affects propaganda, too, but it does not make it impossible." (Plekhanov, quoted by Lenin in CW 4, p. 361)

For this reason, and despite the presence of national organizations oriented toward agitation and "mass action," unaffiliated study groups, propaganda circles, and local organizations have persisted and even increased in number.

But this is only half the picture. If the movement has not made decisive progress on its current tasks, then something, some force or tendency, has

hampered its efforts. The prevailing trend in the communist movement--the parties, parties to-be, and a large section of the organized forces--has seen Right opportunism, particularly Right opportunism in political line, as the chief obstacle preventing completion of our tasks.² Even many of those who have not stepped into "new period" wonderland nonetheless agree on how we will get there. But directing the spearhead of attack against right opportunism and concentrating the attack around political line have not led the communist forces forward in overcoming either their disorganization or their isolation from the working class. On the contrary, the campaign against right opportunism, and the focus on political line, have clearly increased the division of Marxist-Leninists and probably increased their isolation as well. In other words, the communist movement has not completed its tasks or even posed them properly, because of a deviation which, among other things, sees right opportunism, particularly right opportunism in political line, as the main cause of its difficulties. This deviation goes hand in hand with the absence of progress on our tasks and accounts together with it for the persistence and multiplication of small organizations, local collectives, and study circles.

The communist movement has not cleared away the chief obstacle to the completion of our current tasks, because it has largely looked for that obstacle in the wrong place, and because it has mainly looked for the wrong obstacle. It has looked mainly in political line and mainly for right opportunism.

Footnotes

¹Like a trick mirror in some amusement park, the WVO and the "Revolutionary Wing" (PRRWO/RWL) provide an extreme reflection of this generalized "leftist" subjectivism:

Principally because of the emergence of the mighty [!!] irreversible trend based on building the party on the ideological plane, and secondarily because of the flow of the mass movements--because of this "totality of historical conditions," [!!] today the second period of the communist movement has ended. Now we are entering the third period, when political line is the key link. (**Workers Viewpoint Journal**, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 99)

In a nutshell, mainly because of us, we are entering the third period.

²This assumes that we discount the Rightward shifts in line undertaken by groups after they have formed parties, i.e., after they claim to have defeated the main danger of the present (or "past") period, and have overcome the disorganization of the genuine communist forces and their isolation from the working class. Of course, they change tack precisely because of their actual isolation from the revolutionary and workers' movements....

Among the larger groups, the OL looks like a possible exception to the predominant trend. For three years (May 1972-Spring 1975), it held that ultra-leftism constituted the main danger within the anti-revisionist camp. But in fact the OL is the exception that proves the rule. On the one hand, the OL did not set about a real analysis of the social, historical, and ideological roots of "left" opportunism. While the ATM(M-L) has always seen Right opportunism as the main danger, it has pointed out that "the OL has **never** waged a **consistent** struggle against 'ultra-leftism'". (**Revolutionary Cause**, April 1976, p. 9) Instead, the talk against "leftism" served groupist ends, justifying the OL's analysis of the "fascist tide sweeping the country," its calls for "uncritical support" of reform movements in the trade unions, and its refusal to struggle for principled unity with wide sections of the communist movement. This inconsistency grew out of both the "group spirit" and a superficial, eclectic understanding of ultra-leftism, which incorporated elements of Rightist, Marxist-Leninist, and, in particular, anarcho-syndicalist critiques. The OL's alternating characterizations of the RU/RCP as first "left," then right opportunist illustrates this confusion. On the other hand, the OL found it necessary to take Rightism as the main danger from the moment they announced their intention to form the Party. "Right opportunism" posed the main threat to their ultra-left party's formation.