

Proletarian Unity League

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

Chapter 2: The Danger from the "Left"

D. "Left" Sectarianism: The Main Danger to the U.S. Communist Movement

The organizational level occupies the foreground in the struggle for the Party at this time. By this we mean that the communist movement's present forms of organization and of spontaneous organizational growth prevent it from making decisive advances on its current tasks. The main danger has a form specific to the organizational level--sectarianism--but roots in a particular ideological tendency.

Sectarianism consists in raising the interests of the individual group or trend above the interests of the communist movement and the proletariat as a whole. In order to assert itself over any extended period of time, sectarianism must have some deeper ideological justification for opposing the interests of a small group to the collective interest. It must rationalize its individualism in organizational matters. The sectarianism in the U.S. communist movement has its ideological roots chiefly in "Leftism," and it represents a "left" opportunist line in party-building.

We have said that the main arguments perpetuating the present disarray and primitiveness of the communist movement come from the "Left." This "left" opportunist trend manifests itself at every level of communist activity, in every area of practice and policy. In order to combat our "Left-Wing Communism" successfully, Marxist-Leninists must grasp the unity of various types of "left" errors as well as the distinct features of each. Because of the pre-eminent position of organizational questions at this time, because party-building line is the key link, "left" sectarianism presents the most immediate danger. We therefore define the main danger to a decisive advance on our current tasks as "left" sectarianism.

The several levels of the party-building process do not function independently of one another. Each entertains close relations with the others; together they form a structured whole. But they also preserve a certain autonomy, as we saw in the case of the small-circle mentality prevalent during the early 1920's in Russia (see Chapter I, Section C above). Deviations at any level may occur in combination with "opposite" deviations

at other levels. Sectarianism has this relatively autonomous character, although different currents associate it uniquely with either Right or "left" errors. As we have seen, the parties and parties-to-be, as well as some smaller groups, link small-groupism or sectarianism with Rightism, and try to draw analogies to the sectarianism Lenin fought around the time of the RSDLP "Second Congress. Others assume that sectarianism necessarily means a "left" deviation, and use sectarian interchangeably with ultra-leftist or dogmatic. Neither description adequately summarizes the specific nature of sectarianism, which grows out of both kinds of errors, yet also can have a certain momentum of its own.

Sectarianism occurs in two contexts: towards the masses and within either the Party or communist movement. Sectarianism in the mass activities of communists leads to exclusiveness towards non-communists and severs the Party's ties with the masses. Sectarianism in internal relations leads to the formation of cliques and disrupts the unity of the Party or movement. Either "left" or Right political lines can have sectarianism towards the masses as an outgrowth:

"Sectarianism is the extreme degree of a deviation, carried to the point of complete or almost complete separation from the masses. As there are two deviations, right and "left," so there can be two kinds of sectarianisms, right and "left".... And what is right sectarianism? To a great extent, it is tailism. It is breaking away from the tail. It means that the Party does not even drag at the tail of the masses, but far behind the tail, being split away from the masses.

"A historic example of right sectarianism was the situation in the CPUSA in 1930....

"And what is "left" sectarianism? "Left" sectarianism is a jump ahead, when the Party or group which is leading ahead is completely separated from the masses. "Left" sectarianism is the preaching of revolutionary mass actions at a period when the masses are historically asleep. This means the isolated action of the vanguard alone, of the staff of the revolution alone, without any masses." ("Some Questions of the Work of the CPUSA," by Green, **The Communist International**, Vol. X, No. 17, p, 571)

Similarly, both types of deviations inevitably produce sectarianism or factionalism within the Party or communist movement. Cliques of one kind or another form to protect the interests of the revisionist trend (the Gus Hall clique in the CPUSA, or the Milton Rosen clique of the PLP).

Just as the ideological and political lines of various communist groups may combine "left" and Right, as well as correct features, so sectarianism may result from both "left" and Right errors. But one tendency will prevail overall and determine the main character of the sectarianism in question. In the U.S. communist movement today, sectarianism stems mainly from the "Left." To understand the particularities of "left" and Right errors in the current situation, we need to review the character and tasks of the present strategic period of party-building.

Three factors characterize the present strategic period: the existence of serious disagreements among Marxist-Leninists (leaving aside for the moment their ideological nature); disunity and division prevails over unity and solidarity--an incorrect line prevails over the correct line; and Marxist-Leninists are largely isolated from the workers' movement (the overwhelming percentage of the class vanguard has not taken up the cause of communism). It follows that Marxist-Leninists must turn their attention to clearing up their internal disagreements so as to overcome their disorganization and isolation. In a period of crippling disagreements, the policy pursued towards resolving those disagreements becomes the key link.

Two basic errors can arise over these tasks. The "extreme degree" of each -- that point at which an error erects itself into a whole system of politics-- results in sectarianism.

The Right deviation in this period argues against a determination of our tasks and the speediest passage from one to the other. Rightists complain that we cannot pass from study to propaganda among the working class because our theory does not answer enough questions; or that we cannot pass from concentrating on propaganda to agitation because enough workers have not taken up communism or from agitation to mass action because the working class isn't ready. Right opportunism in party-building justifies passivity and opposes the action of the conscious element.

Right sectarianism towards the masses expresses itself in a conservatism towards the mass movement in general and its most advanced sectors in particular. Right sectarians content themselves with trailing behind the working class, holding back the fusion of Marxism-Leninism with the workers' movement. This happens because they underestimate the extent of fusion, and the level of the vanguard elements. Rather than leading this process, they argue that the movement has not sufficiently "matured" for any mass agitation, say, and oppose "precipitous" action at a time when the class vanguard is intent upon proceeding with or without the communists. The Right deviation regards what is not obsolete for the backward sectors as not obsolete for the best elements of the working class, obstructing the

development of the active sections of the masses in the name of organizing the popular forces as a whole. Denying the uneven growth of class consciousness under capitalism, the Rights argue for a stage theory in which first the entire proletarian and oppressed masses unite around petty reforms, and then proceed, step by step, as a united mass to wider issues, and with them, the Party. In practice this conception will alienate the proletarian vanguard and leave the Marxist-Leninists in their wake.

The Right deviation underestimates the seriousness of our current disagreements which it tends to dismiss as empty squabbles. Therefore it minimizes the importance of clearing up and deciding various questions internal to the communist movement. The Rights refuse to recognize the burning ideological problems upon whose solution the further development of the Marxist-Leninist forces now rests. From this perspective, they maneuver to suppress the indispensable clarification of the two-line struggle. In their attempts to **enforce** conciliationism at a time when divergent perspectives have disorganized revolutionary work, the Right deviation takes on a sectarian character. While they may stand for the unity of the communist movement, they do not advocate unity in order to advance on our tasks, but instead preach unity for its own sake. Their unity will not bring the revolutionary Party closer; it will arrest the development of the working class vanguard. Though it may exclude some of the chief "squabblers," the same unresolved disagreements will cripple their Party.

The "Left" deviation expresses itself in an exaggeration of the revolutionary possibilities of the current situation. "Left" sectarianism towards the working class in turn flows from this adventurism. Impatient with the present level of fusion of Marxism-Leninism with the workers' movement, the "Lefts" race ahead in the vain belief that their "exemplary behavior" will excite a widespread "socialist emulation" movement. The difference between this and the Right deviation may emerge more clearly through a reference to military strategy.

Summing up the lessons of China's Second Revolutionary Civil War, Mao Tse-tung delineated two deviations around the passage from guerrilla to regular warfare:

"We see that the two processes, the civil war and the War of Resistance Against Japan, and their four strategic periods, contain three changes in strategy. The first was the change from guerrilla warfare to regular warfare in the civil war....

"The first of the three changes encountered great difficulties. It involved a twofold task. On the one hand, we had to combat the Right tendency of

localism and guerrillaism, which consisted in clinging to guerrilla habits and refusing to make the turn to regularization, a tendency which arose because our cadres underestimated the changes in the enemy's situation and our own tasks...On the other hand, we also had to combat the "Left" tendency of over-centralization and adventurism which put undue stress on regularization, a tendency which arose because some of the leading cadres overestimated the enemy, set the tasks too high, and mechanically applied foreign experience regardless of the actual conditions." (**SW II**. p. 228)

The Right deviation lagged behind the change in objective and subjective conditions, while the "left" deviation raced ahead of it. In our own movement, the "Lefts" typically pass over the building up of the masses' consciousness and organization in favor of calls for mass revolutionary action. These calls naturally fall on deaf ears. Like the Rights, the "Lefts" fail to reckon with the uneven development of class consciousness under capitalism, equating that of the most politically advanced elements with that of the broad masses, and further confusing their own resolves with that of the most advanced elements. In our movement they frequently devise elaborate rationales for the maintenance of these confusions, and actually advocate leading the advanced, or even just themselves, in isolation from the broad masses of the center. Though they assume the guise of "concentrating on the advanced," these super-revolutionary formulas either repulse the advanced themselves, or when they do manage to rally a few workers, destroy those organic links to the masses which identify those workers as the advanced of a definite class. With their slogans and orientation, the "Lefts" fence themselves off in sectarian fashion from the proletarian vanguard.

In regard to the communist movement, the "Lefts" exaggerate the seriousness of the current disagreements, with one exception: the very serious disagreements with the ultra-left line. Otherwise, they refuse to distinguish between major and minor disagreements, in effect considering all disputes of critical importance. Confusing principles of party-building with particular experiences of building Parties, and strategies for party-formation with various tactical means for moving towards one, the "Lefts" insist upon a high, indeed practically unattainable level of unity around every question. Where the Rights turn away from political issues demanding immediate resolution, the ultra-lefts speculate about problems along the high road to revolution, problems concerning which no one can have very substantive opinions.

The Rights will not summarize experience because they refuse to demarcate the two-line struggle. Since they do not define the nature of the experience necessary to clarify differences and move forward, they can always plead

that we do not have enough experience. The "Lefts," on the other hand, reject the criterion of experience or practice, and therefore consider it irrelevant to any clarification of lines. Instead they commence arguing over various "blueprints for the future," questions which have little immediate relevance to the tasks of communists in the present period, and whose resolution depends on developments which cannot be foreseen. The Workers Viewpoint Organization's view of its "anti-revisionist premises" provides a characteristic example:

"Having a firmer and stronger grasp of these theoretical premises is the only safeguard against degeneration, the only guarantee to detect shades and forms of revisionism, defeat its particular manifestations and repudiate it as an integral whole." (WV, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 27)¹

According to WVO, it is not sufficient to struggle against present-day revisionism, against the revisionism which exists; we must also struggle today over the revisionism of tomorrow. We must "innoculate" ourselves against the revisionism which will grow up in the future, whose contours and content we can divine through the "telescope," not of Marxism-Leninism, but of the "anti-revisionist premises." The particular issues around which revisionism of the "Left" and Right contend today with Marxism-Leninism, or the particular issues around which they will contend tomorrow, do not matter. Real circumstances do not concern subjective idealists, only some ahistorical essence of revisionism and anti-revisionism.

The main danger to the U.S. communist movement does not stem from the Right, from **unprincipled conciliationism** in party-formation. Quite the contrary: the main danger comes from the **unprincipled polarization** of the movement, the constant splitting and fragmentation, and the multiplication of "Left-Wing Communist" parties. The major tendencies among the Marxist-Leninist forces do not preach passivity in party-building and try to prevent the movement from passing from one period to another, as conditions warrant. No, the major tendencies pay little attention to any conditions except their own subjective ones, give little thought to whether or not the vanguard has been won to communism, and leap over necessary tasks (the unification of Marxist-Leninists, patient propaganda among the politically active workers). In other words, the theoretical justification of the present mis-organization of the communist movement comes principally from the "Left." We can illustrate the "leftist" voluntarism of major sections of the communist movement by examining some of the dominant positions on the winning of the class vanguard to communism.

Footnote

¹Under heavy criticism, the WVO has recently stopped using the term "anti-revisionist premises," but their idealist approach to "guaranteeing" themselves against degeneration remains the same.