

## FAN THE FLAMES

# CPUSA's Official Optimism Rooted in Its Political Line

By Max Elbaum

In politics, there are few things as dangerous as substituting what you would like to believe for what really exists. It may produce a temporary burst of euphoria, but sooner or later the class struggle—and the class enemy—will force you back down to earth.

This is the problem that leaps out at anyone who undertakes a serious examination of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). The CPUSA says so many things we'd all like to believe are true. According to its 23rd National Convention held last week in Cleveland (see accompanying article, page 3), the U.S. is in the midst of a "many-sided popular upsurge," "millions have lost confidence in 'the system,'" the country has a "76% peace majority," the trade union movement has taken "major steps toward political independence" and is on the "threshold of a period of offensive actions." The working class is "more radical and militant...less anticommunist, less class collaborationist and less racist than it was even five years ago...and there is much more class and socialist consciousness out there to be tapped than we are aware of." CPUSA General Secretary Gus Hall even goes so far as to assure us that "without question" Ronald Reagan will be defeated in 1984.

Unfortunately, politics is not the art of wish fulfillment. And this is why the CPUSA, for all its strengths (links to the international communist movement, strong class and racial composition, positioning within the trade union movement), remains an extremely poor vehicle to entrust with guiding the U.S. working class movement through the immensely difficult period that lies ahead.

### BASIC LINE

If the problem were only a bit of excess enthusiasm for becoming immersed in the class struggle, the CPUSA might be let off the hook with a minor criticism and a suggestion that it weigh its words more carefully. Unfortunately, the source of the CPUSA's "official optimism" is rooted far deeper—in the basic political program and analysis that guides the organization.

The CPUSA's errors begin precisely on the point which the party targets as its greatest strength—its class analysis of U.S. society and the working class in particular. In classically mechanical materialist fashion, the CPUSA views the U.S. working class as an essentially homogeneous grouping, steadily and spontaneously growing ever more united because of the objective motion of capitalist society. The "Basic Draft Document" for the just-completed national convention put it this way:

"Our main emphasis, our point of reference, our solid framework is the working class as one united class molded by the same system of capitalist exploitation." If this view was simply being advanced as a broad historical truism, a backdrop for conducting a more penetrating and concrete analysis of the various countervailing forces that serve to check the smooth maturation of the U.S. working class into a revolutionary force, then the criticism of the CPUSA's general line might be unwarranted. But this is not what the CPUSA is doing. Any attempt to seriously introduce such factors into a class analysis is dismissed in CPUSA circles as a surrender to "bourgeois and petit bourgeois concepts" that "evade, replace, downgrade, undermine, equate, ignore or minimize...the decisive role of the working class in the overall socio-economic scheme of things."

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Unfortunately, any serious plans to affect the course of the class struggle in the U.S. will require that the working class be seen not only in its underlying unity, but more importantly in its immediate internal contradictions, divisions and struggles. Above all, this means taking into account the serious economic and racial stratifications which have left the U.S. working class extensively divided socially and intensely *split* politically.

The sober fact of the matter is that a significant layer of U.S. workers enjoy an array of economic advantages that make their actual conditions of life quite different from the more oppressed strata of workers in the U.S., as well as from their class brothers and sisters around the world. This division between the upper and lower strata of the class—which is thoroughly racialized—provides the material basis for *two* main political trends to spontaneously arise within the U.S. proletariat. One, rooted in the more oppressed, disproportionately minority sector, is spontaneously pushed toward an advanced set of politics. But the overwhelmingly white upper strata has the material basis for spontaneously producing a stubborn opportunist trend that sees its interest thoroughly bound up with the interests of its "own" bourgeoisie—particularly on the cutting edge questions of imperialist war and the perpetuation of racism.

And the political point at issue here is precisely that the present economic hardship afflicting virtually all sectors of the U.S. working class will not automatically eliminate this split, but actually serve to intensify it. While some hard-hit workers are definitely moving leftward, far too many others attribute the causes of their woes to foreign competition, immigrant workers, fifteen years of "reverse discrimination" in favor of non-whites, and "Soviet-backed terrorism" around the world. In other words, the contradictory spontaneous tendencies toward opportunism as well as class consciousness *both* become accelerated as the class struggle sharpens.

The CPUSA regards such thinking as the most dangerous anti-Marxist and anti-working class heresy, but we will not tire of reminding them of some of Lenin's thoughts on the subject: "...*certain* groups of workers *have already drifted away* to opportunism and to the imperialist bourgeoisie. And that is the very fact the sophists want to *evade*. They confine themselves to 'official optimism'...objective conditions guarantee the unity of the

proletariat and the victory of the revolutionary trend! We forsooth are optimists with regard to the proletariat! But in reality...they are *optimists* with regard to *opportunism*." (Collected Works, Vol. 23, p. 110-111)

### STRATEGY

Undaunted, the CPUSA extends its analysis of a homogeneous working class into an equally erroneous (albeit consistent) political strategy in the form of its anti-monopoly coalition line. Central to this perspective is the notion that the

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working class can be molded into the revolutionary core of a broad cross-class alliance without any polarization with opportunism internal to its own ranks. The responsibility of communist leadership is reduced to "helping" the working class pursue its own natural development toward unity, while being ever vigilant politically and tactically never to introduce "artificial" divisions that might disrupt this spontaneous course forward.

Surely if the revolutionary path for the U.S. working class were so straight, smooth and easy as the CPUSA envisions, we would be in little need of a Leninist vanguard party! (Which helps account for why the Leninist fiber of the CPUSA has so seriously deteriorated in recent years.) However, issuing platitudes about the inevitability of working class unity will not make the deep divisions disappear. It will only leave the advanced section of the U.S. working class politically and theoretically disarmed to mount the fierce struggle against the entrenched opportunist forces who presently dominate the political organizations of the working class. The task of communists must not be to obscure, but to

highlight the demarcation between class resistance and opportunism, galvanize the energy of the most advanced forces, and organize the challenge to opportunism. By doing so, communists lay the basis for uniting the broadest mass of U.S. workers around an advanced line. In other words, the path to the revolutionary unity of the working class does not lie in smoothing over the divisions within its ranks, but, in politically organizing the split that already exists within the working class by, in Lenin's words, conducting an "immediate, systematic, extensive and open struggle" against opportunism.

The most graphic illustration of the distance the CPUSA has traveled from this Leninist course lies in the way the CPUSA poses the test before it in the trade union movement today. At a time when the AFL-CIO center remains tightly controlled by pro-imperialist forces who argue for tighter restrictions on immigrant workers, agitate for protectionist legislation, oppose strict affirmative action programs and are absolutely hostile to socialism and national liberation of oppressed nations, the full text of the CPUSA's view of "The Challenge" before it in the trade unions reads:

"How to be more effective in helping the working class and the trade union movement meet the challenge of the monopoly capital-Reaganite anti-labor offensive. How to be more effective in helping the trade unions to unite and lead the working class from its defensive posture of retreat to offensive struggles and victories."

The CPUSA simply does not agree that a fundamental aspect of the political challenge facing communists is how to mount a struggle against opportunism and break the grip it exercises on the trade unions.

### PROSPECTS

Once these building blocks of the CPUSA's basic line and program are understood, it is easier to see why the most outlandish assessments of the present motion of politics are put forward in all seriousness and widely accepted within the CPUSA. After all, if the working class is homogeneous, if its spontaneous tendency is irresistibly toward unity, if it can be forged into a revolutionary core without a polarization and split within its ranks, then things simply *must* be going well. To admit otherwise (much less to contemplate the possibility of a mass-based fascist movement developing in the U.S.) would call for an explanation that would not stop at an assessment of immediate currents and trends, but would begin to question the fundamental propositions that lie at the core of the CPUSA's politics.

For the moment all indications are that the CPUSA is probably safe from any serious re-examination of its general line from within the party. But sooner or later—and with the bourgeoisie on the move we expect it will be sooner—the class struggle will sharpen with a force and urgency that is bound to shake the complacency of even the most committed "official optimist."

The CPUSA makes clear that what it expects in the coming decade is a repetition of the 1930s—complete with the party playing the vanguard role it did at that time. But what is far more likely is a rerun of the '60s, where the CPUSA was left tailing the trade union leadership while the class struggle passed it by: the party was unable to answer the difficult questions posed by the most advanced elements stepping forward from the spontaneous movements, and the most dedicated fighters looked for other formations through which to learn the science of revolution and participate in the fight against imperialism.

Certainly, much has changed in the last 15 years—but the political line of the CPUSA has not. This is why the struggle for a more advanced perspective to lead the U.S. communist movement remains a pressing task before U.S. Marxist-Leninists. □

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