



An event by the League of Revolutionary Struggle
Reese Erlich, Mae Ngai and Amiri Baraka.

WHO DO YOU MEAN WHEN YOU SAY 'MAOIST'?

By MAE NGAI

John Trinkl's 3-part series (Guardian, Aug. 21, Sept. 4 and 11) on the history of the left and the party-building movement provided some useful perspectives. While pointing out some weaknesses of the left, Trinkl did not cast the history of our movement in an entirely negative light and urged activists to pay attention to concrete political work.

Trinkl and some of those who responded to his articles, however, raised broad allegations against the so-called Maoist sector of the communist movement of the 1970s. Charges ranged from collaboration with U.S. imperialism to ultrasectarian "vanguardism." The League of Revolutionary Struggle is mentioned in passing as the last remaining representative of this "Maoist" trend and thus by association is laden with all the negative baggage from the past.

Several points need to be made:

First, Trinkl and others, in speaking of the "Maoist" sector invariably refer to that part of the left that came out of the white student movement. But social democrats, Trotskyists, anarchists and other tendencies came out of the white student movement as well. Characteristics attributed to "Maoism" were actually problems the white student movement and most trends that came out of it suffered from as well: namely, individualism, chauvinism, commandism, dogmatism, impetuosity, inexperience.

Secondly, the sector of the new communist movement that considered itself sympathetic to China during the 1970s never was unified in its outlook. The positions of groups differed over questions such as party building, Angola, the evaluation of the gang of four, the theory of the three worlds and the Afro-American national question, among many others.

NEVER SLAVISH

Third, while some groups may have slavishly followed what they believed was the international line of the Communist Party of China during the 1970s, the League maintained its independent views. We never sided with U.S. imperialism or encouraged a "united front" with the U.S. bourgeoisie, supported the Shah of Iran, or attacked the MPLA in Angola, or any other such positions. Furthermore, the League has never considered itself "the vanguard organization of the U.S. proletariat."

Our differences with these points in part explain why we never organizationally united with those who held those perspectives. While we admired and respected the revolutionary contributions of the Mao Zedong and the Communist Party of China, we always maintained that the focus of our attention had to be placed on solving the concrete problems of the socialist revolution in the U.S. We never called ourselves "Maoist."

Fourth, while Trinkl acknowledged that the dynamics of the new communist movement that emerged from the Black liberation movement possessed its own characteristics, he did not elaborate. Neither did he mention the communist movement that came out of the other oppressed nationalities, such as Chicanos, Latinos and Asians. This is a major weakness, since large numbers of oppressed nationality activists continue to be active in the revolutionary movement.

The League has to be examined in this context. We remain one of the largest communist organizations in the U.S., composed of over 75% oppressed nationalities and over 70% from working-class backgrounds. For Trinkl to assess only the experience of those organizations that primarily came out of the white student movement one-sidedly and narrowly defines the communist movement.

Fifth, Trinkl focuses on the failures of our movement, on the organizations that collapsed and the efforts that never reached fruition. To be sure, there were more setbacks than success stories, but the task is to determine what enabled certain groups to survive and grow, what set apart their experiences from those who failed.

The League continues to develop as a Marxist-Leninist organization in part because many of our members have been involved in the mass struggle for fifteen, twenty years. While we have and continue to make our share of mistakes, we have done our work from the perspective of trying to solve the concrete problems of the revolution in the U.S. No other consideration, such as allegiance to another party, or a need for "orthodoxy" has governed how we developed our political outlook.

Like others, many of us in the League became revolutionaries in the 1960s not because of the polemics in the international communist movement, but because of our experience in the struggle against national and class oppression. And we took up Marxism-Leninism because it provided the clearest explanation of this oppression and an outlook that indicated the way forward. We have always tried to apply Marxism-Leninism creatively, to understand the particular conditions of the U.S. and what it will take to make the socialist revolution.

We did not join the Communist Party USA in the 1960s, not because of the international polemics, but because from our own experience we saw their failure to provide any revolutionary alternative. The CPUSA called Malcolm X a police agent, dismissed the Black Panther Party, and with such positions, insured that a whole generation of revolutionary activists would turn away from it.

The problem facing the left today is, with a movement that is splintered and appears at an ebb, what is the way forward? We believe that the left must strive to integrate with the struggles of the people and on the basis of this experience, study and the lessons of other progressive forces, step by step solve the immediate and strategic problems of making the socialist revolution. We also believe the left must find ways to work together despite many differences that will not quickly or easily pass. Revolution in the U.S. will be a protracted process. For every day the left does not work together, we only hurt ourselves.

Many individual activists are unaffiliated or even leery of left organizations. Our hope is that in the course of working together against imperialism unaffiliated individuals as well as organized left groups can begin to find a common ground for more trust, discussion, struggle and ultimately greater unity.

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