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WHY WE SHOULD REMAIN AN M-L ORGANIZATION
a critique of the Secretariat's proposal

The changes proposed by the majority of the Secretariat, radical though they may be, sound good to many of us because they promise a fresh approach to some serious and persistent problems in our work. Among these are an overextended center; a lack of sufficiently strong district-level leadership; not enough internal education and development of new cadre; not enough real political discussion in the units, which tend to be task-oriented and isolated from one another; and most frustrating, an inability to make organizational gains that fully reflect the dramatic expansion of our influence in the mass movement.

We are, in a sense, victims of our success. A whole new generation of students has joined us over the last several years. We have begun to do serious recruiting from the ranks of lower strata workers, though this is proving a complex and time-consuming process. In electoral and union politics and in a growing number of broad mass organizations, we are contending for power and winning office--increasing our influence while opening us up to red-baiting attacks from jealous lefties and others.

Our organizational structure, which owes more to our own history than to any self-conscious attempt to duplicate the Marxist-Leninist parties in other countries, resembles nothing so much as an old '60's style political collective. Yet here we are in the '90's, operating on a national scale and struggling to provide political leadership to a broad and complex range of mass movements and organizations. So far we have been pretty successful, but our successes are costing us plenty.
The majority of the Secretariat have concluded, I believe correctly, that our present structure is a barrier to dealing with our problems and moving forward with our work. Our cadre policy has been applied flexibly and with sensitivity, but it is also better suited to different historical conditions than we face in this country today. The inability of most cadre to function openly makes it much harder to consolidate our political gains, recruit, and defend ourselves against anti-communist attacks.

However, what is being proposed is not simply structural changes. The Secretariat majority has raised basic questions about our political outlook, what we believe in and how, as revolutionaries, we understand the world and analyze the problems of making revolution. Are we still Marxist-Leninists? Do we even agree with Lenin and Marx? Should we continue to practice democratic centralism? Do we now reject the idea of a vanguard party and the dictatorship of the proletariat? Is the historical experience of the communist movement relevant to what is happening today?

Old wine in a new bottle?

Some say that, even if we no longer call ourselves Marxist-Leninists, "our basic politics won't change." They argued that we will still be the same people, our outlook and ideas shaped and developed by the same collective experience and history. We still stand on the side of the working class, oppressed nationality movements, oppressed people everywhere. We will still fight for the same demands, uphold the same minimum program, print the same things in Unity, have unity around the same political line.
This argument strikes me as shortsighted and a bit naive. What has held us together as an organization, and enabled us to make the gains we have made, is that we operate within a framework of shared assumptions. They

make it possible for us to sum up our experiences, take up new questions, struggle them out together until we reach unity, then test our conclusions out in practice. They give continuity and staying power to our work in a way which simple agreement around particular issues could not. In fact, they allow us to function effectively even when we disagree around particular points.

It's not enough to say, "We all agree on the line of the organization." Our political line did not emerge from nowhere. It came about through the application of a Marxist-Leninist outlook and method of analysis to the concrete conditions facing the U.S. revolutionary movement. Neither is it etched in stone. It is constantly changing and developing, as events and conditions, and our understanding of them, change and develop. Marxism-Leninism gives us the ability to navigate these changes, to analyze and act on them in a coherent and sustained way, to correct mistakes and arrive at new understandings, to develop a political line that means something in the real world.

Unity is a terrific paper, but it does not attempt to explicate all aspects of our theory and line, nor should it. Its purpose is to put our views (and the views of other like-minded progressives) on the issues of the day in a concise and readable form. There are a whole range of questions of our line, our work, our view of making revolution that simply could not go into the paper. We have occasionally used Forward for this purpose. If we try to make Unity convey the sum and substance of our politics, one of two things will happen: either our paper will become unreadable, or our politics will become increasingly shallow and inadequate to the task of making socialist revolution.

We no longer insist that people be conscious Marxist-Leninists when they join the organization. But we do try (albeit with mixed results) to create a situation within the organization where all of us can acquire a basic understanding of where our politics come from and the analytical tools needed to get our bearings independently, without having to wait for orders from above.

Even those cadre who may have joined without a firm grounding in Marxism-Leninism were uniting with a political line arrived at through Marxist-Leninist methods. Without those methods, I question how we will struggle through difficult political questions and come to unity around them in the future. Our decisions will tend more and more to be based purely on the demands of the moment, made subjectively rather than scientifically. When differences of opinion arise, we will not have a solid basis on which to thrash them out.

If Marxism-Leninism ceases to be a unifying principle of our organization, the change may not be apparent at first. But over time, as new people guided by different assumptions join us, and new situations arise which our past practice has not prepared us to deal with, there is a very good chance that our original vision will be lost and we will find ourselves travelling a very different road than the one we're on now.
I understand and respect the difficulty political study poses for some cadre with difficult lives or limited education. But I think this is a problem the organization should keep struggling with, even if it means reordering its priorities. I believe a solution can be found. Properly presented, Marxism-Leninism should not be beyond anybody's grasp. It should help people see things more clearly, not leave them more confused.

And people need that clarity, the way they need water and air. They want an overview which lets them make sense of the world, the better to deal with the horrors of life under capitalism. I don't think it's any accident that many of the best fighters, those most aware of the injustices around them, are also deeply religious--though the Bible poses some real intellectual challenges of its own. But while religion gives people a sense of how to function like decent human beings in an unjust world, Marxism-Leninism tells us how to struggle for a just one.

In defense of Lenin

The majority of the Secretariat, no doubt reacting to recent events in China, Eastern Europe and Nicaragua, have apparently concluded that Lenin was simply wrong--not just about certain peripheral issues but about some very fundamental ones, bearing directly on the whole question of revolutionary leadership, the seizure of state power and the methods needed to bring about the kind of socialist society we want to see.

If we were to embrace this conclusion, we would be a very different kind of organization--in content as well as form. We have never been dogmatists, looking to the classics for ready-made answers. We have always understood that Lenin and Marx were products of their time, just as we are products of ours. But we have also believed that Lenin and Marx provide us with a scientific method of analyzing social relations and social change that can be applied to most historical situations--that the essence of their writings embody certain "universal truths" and that our job as revolutionaries was to apply these universal truths to the concrete conditions in the U.S. today. Nothing I've heard in the course of this discussion has convinced me otherwise.

A spokesperson for the Secretariat majority has argued that "each generation must generate its own revolutionary theory." But it's both foolish and arrogant for us to assume that we could come up with a usable theory that was not firmly grounded in the insights of those who have come before us. Thanks to a fellow named Einstein, we know today that what Isaac Newton had to say about the laws of gravity and falling bodies did not represent the last word in theoretical physics. Nevertheless, we're not going to start jumping out of 10th story windows to show how wrong Newton was. We know what would happen if we did.

I believe the class struggle is a universal truth, that Marx was correct when he said that it was the essence of all human history. I believe that socialism is not simply "more just" than capitalism, it represents a higher stage in the development of human social relations and it is the historic role of the working class to bring it about. I believe that to do this the working class needs its own political organization, committed to fighting for not only its short-range interests but for the overthrow of the capitalist class and the seizure of power by the working class. I believe it is the responsibility of that organization to provide continuity as well as leadership to the working class struggle; to concentrate the experiences and lessons learned in the various mass struggles, use them to further develop the strategy and political line of the movement, and then test them out again in the realm of practice: "from the masses, to the masses." This is the essence of democratic centralism (not mandatory child care shifts or 68-hour work weeks!).

I also believe that all societies based on exploitation are ultimately held together by force, simply because no one submits to exploitation voluntarily, and that the state is the expression of that force. For this reason, it's not enough for the working class and the capitalist class to contend for control of the existing state apparatus, although that may be what happens at a certain stage of the revolutionary movement. To truly seize power, workers have to do away with the capitalist state and establish their own, one which allows them to carry out the will of the people in a way the capitalist state never could.

Even under conditions of formal democracy such as we have in the U.S. today, the interests and ideas of the working class cannot compete on equal terms with those of the ruling class. The capitalists hold all the cards. Not only do they control the means of producing wealth, the fundamental source of power in any society; but they also dominate the the courts, the police and armed forces, the media, the educational system, the major political parties. They set the terms for political discussion, the conditions under which it will take place. The working class, caught up in the daily battle to survive under conditions of capitalist exploitation, is effectively "debarred from participating in social and political life" as Lenin puts it.

For this reason the working class party must concern itself not simply with representing the working class, but with empowering it--by any means necessary. The capitalist state is in essence repressive. The working class must be prepared to use force to overthrow it and, having done so, to defend the revolution by force against the capitalists' efforts to return to power. For the same reason, if the working class seizure of power is to be a reality, the working class party has to be able to function under any kind of conditions--clandestinely in times of repression, so as to protect its members; openly under conditions of bourgeois democracy, so as to take full advantage of the opportunities bourgeois democracy allows.

(Lenin's analysis of imperialism and the national question, which has been a cornerstone of our work as long as the organization has existed, is equally important, but since no one appears to be questioning it I won't discuss it here.)

I may have missed a few things, but these strike me as the essential points of Marxism-Leninism. They are not simply matters of political program or line; they are basic to the way we, as revolutionaries, see the world. If the Secretariat majority now feels it can no longer accept some of these points, they have a responsibility to put out a clear, thorough critique which spells out precisely where Lenin (or Marx) went wrong, why, and what principles they would establish in place of what they now reject. I don't see how the organization can make the kind of decisions we are being called upon to make until that happens.

I assume such a critique is in the works. What I've heard so far are several arguments which are no doubt fragments of a larger and more comprehensive analysis. To make criticisms before such an analysis is fully formed or articulated is probably unfair, but inasmuch as the debate over the organization's future has already been joined, I don't see any choice. I've tried as best I can to understand the position of the

Secretariat majority, to the extent that it has been explicitly spelled out. These are the bones I have to pick with it.

"Majority revolution" vs. dictatorship of the proletariat

The Sandinistas' decision to step down rather than continue governing without a popular mandate is being characterized as a radical departure from Leninism. Personally, I don't claim to know what Lenin would have done in Ortega's shoes; after all, the man has been dead almost 70 years. But Lenin was nothing if not practical. The conclusion I would draw from the Nicaraguan election and the events that followed is that the Sandinistas were not strong enough to consolidate the revolution in the face of unrelenting U.S. imperialist attacks, that they were intelligent enough to realize it, and that they opted to make a tactical retreat instead of trying to hold onto power when objective conditions would not support it. I respect this decision. Time will tell whether it was correct.

I don't regard the notion of a "majority revolution" as some kind of theoretical breakthrough. Most revolutions are majority revolutions. Few revolutionary movements could prevail over the armed might of the ruling class, enjoying all the advantages which state power confers, unless they did have majority support. If the working class does not constitute a majority of the population (as was the case in the Chinese and other third world revolutions) it generally takes power through a coalition of class forces united around a common revolutionary program such as anti-imperialism or national liberation. Lenin himself spoke of a "people's revolution" where "the mass of the people, the enormous majority, make(s) its appearance actively, independently, with its own economic and political demands." What actually took place in Russia in 1917, when a relatively small but highly organized and class conscious working class moved into a power vaccuum left by the collapse of Tsarism, is not typical.

Concerning the Soviet Union, it may well be true that the abuses of Stalinism had their roots to some extent in the minority character of Bolshevik revolution. But it's pointless and metaphysical to suggest that the Bolsheviks should have waited for a "more appropriate time" to seize power. In the real world, history does not order itself to suit our convenience. For all the problems which have attended socialist construction in the Soviet Union, the world is a better place for its having been attempted there.

The Secretariat majority has suggested that under Lenin's concept of a vanguard party, the party--presumably acting in the interests of the working class--tends to substitute itself for the working class, increasingly relying on force rather than a popular mandate to stay in power after the bourgeoisie has been overthrown. This criticism is not new; Trotsky made it of Lenin in the years leading up to the Bolshevik revolution. And I think it's fair to say that, if we're talking about the Soviet Union after Stalin consolidated his power in the late 1920's, the criticism is correct.

But to my thinking the problem did not lie with Lenin's views on the party or how workers should seize and hold state power. The problem was that the dictatorship of the proletariat, instituted as a temporary measure to guard against the immediate threat of counterrevolution, continued on as a self-perpetuating institution long after Lenin's death, long after the danger of a bourgeois return to power had receded. Beyond a certain point, the revolution is threatened far less by any move by the old capitalist class to reassert itself than by the prospect that the party will become alienated from its base and fail to be accountable to the masses.

Since Lenin's death a number of countries have undertaken the task of socialist construction. One thing we have learned from their experience is that the process is a lot longer and more complex than anyone would have realized in 1917. New contradictions arise even after the defeat of the old ruling class, and new institutions have to be built that allow the masses to deal with them in way which truly reflects their will, until such time as true communism--a society based on genuine equality--becomes a realizable possibility and renders the state irrelevant.

The comments of Marx, Engels and Lenin on the "withering away of the state" aren't terribly helpful on this point. Based on what we know today, they seem abstract, simplistic, maybe a little naive. That is to be expected: except for the Paris Commune, a very brief and ephemeral experiment in working class power, they had no practical experience upon which to base their ideas. I see no reason here to reject Marxism-Leninism as a political outlook. Rather, we should be using the Marxist-Leninist method of analysis to analyze and sum up the experience of building socialism in the countries where it has been attempted since 1917. I still think what Lenin wrote in <u>State and Revolution</u> is relevant in its analysis of the bourgeois state and the limits of parliamentary socialism and in its ultimate vision of a truly free, classless society.

Running through the arguments of the Secretariat majority is what strikes me as a fundamental misreading of Lenin. They seem to equate the dictatorship of the proletariat with the seizure of power by an armed minority, which tends to evolve into a one-party state after capitalism is overthrown.

Maybe you could characterize the practice of the Eastern European Communist parties this way, but it is a perversion of Marxism-Leninism. We have never defended these parties, and we should not feel compelled to change our politics now to dissociate ourselves from them. The point of the dictatorship of the proletariat as described by Marx, Engels and Lenin is to expand democracy, not restrict it. It is necessary because ultimately the will of the people cannot be realized under a bourgeois state, and parliamentary means are not adequate to carry out a working class revolution.

Petty bourgeois socialists and social democrats, people who divorce the idea of socialism from the reality of class warfare, have never been able to accept this idea. I once heard Michael Harrington of DSA wind up his fiery, arm-waving speech denouncing the evils of U.S. capitalism by

calling for worker representation on the Federal Reserve Board. I don't think this is the kind of demand working people will risk their lives fighting for, and I don't think winning it would liberate them in any meaningful way. In a society where the working class truly held political power, the Federal Reserve Board would not exist.

Secret vs. open organization

The Secretariat majority would apparently have us choose between a small, clandestine "illegal" organization and an open, mass "legal" one. This strikes me as simplistic and undialectical. The kind of organization you have should reflect the conditions you work under at any given time. These conditions change constantly, and the organization has to be able to change with them if it is to endure and successfully guide the revolutionary movement through to its conclusion.

There is a tradeoff in security vs. "openness." One course of action offers us a measure of protection against official repression, but with a corresponding sacrifice in our ability to win people over. The other allows us to be much more aggressive in contending for the hearts and minds of the masses, and accountable to the masses in a way that a secret organization can not be. But it carries its own set of risks, serious enough that the Secretariat majority apparently feels that we cannot function openly and still call ourselves communists.

The trick is to weigh one set of risks against the other, based on existing conditions, and come up with a flexible approach which maximizes the advantages and minimizes the risks. Comrades from Watsonville, the Rainbow, the Chicano student movement have given eloquent testimony to the ways in which our work is increasingly held back by our inability to function openly. Listening to them, I would conclude that at this point in our organization's history we lose far more than we gain by staying in the closet. It may not be that way later, but it is now.

I also respect, and agree with, the Secretariat's argument that ultimately the best way to combat red-baiting and repression is through an aggressive and open mass presence, not conspiratorial methods. Frankly, I've always had trouble with secrecy. I'm proud of my membership in the organization, as proud as I am of my children, and would shout it from the housetops if I could. When I talk politics with fellow workers or others, I speak from the heart, and few things bother me more than the fact that I am not being completely candid with them, and they probably sense it.

I don't know quite what we should do about this. I wish I did. I do feel that in the last analysis our organizational approach should serve our politics and not the other way around. Whatever we choose to call ourselves (and the organization could certainly use a better name) we have to stand for the same principles. We should study the experience of communist parties in other countries which have functioned as open, legal mass organizations while continuing to uphold Marxism-Leninism, and see what we can learn from them, before we make any hasty uninformed decisions.

One thing we should keep in mind, as far as security goes, is that people are not persecuted in this country because they belong to secret organizations, but because they represent ideas that threaten the powers that be. This applies to communists and non-communists alike.

Martin Luther King believed in nonviolence, but even winning the Nobel Prize was did not stop him from literally being hounded to the grave by

the FBI. Geronimo Pratt continues to rot in jail, fifteen years after the COINTEL program which put him there was supposedly exposed and discredited. Farm workers were murdered with the full sanction of the legal system, simply because they fought for union representation. The McCarthy era witchhunts targeted not just communists, but anyone who had ever associated with communists or sided with them around particular issues (the so-called "fellow travelers").

There is no way we can promise our cadre that if we follow the right security policy or adopt a non-Leninist line they will never have to deal with official repression. To be politically committed at all in this society is to take risks.

The working class in the united front

The traditional role of Marxist-Leninists has been to analyze the basis upon which the working class can ally with other class forces, to make sure the interests of the working class are represented in the united fronts and where possible to struggle for working class leadership in the united fronts. The Secretariat majority now seems to be saying that at this time the U.S. working class lacks the strategic and tactical initiative to take a strong role in these united fronts. Moreover, we should not be trying to substitute ourselves for the working class in these coalitions, pouring all our energies into keeping them on the right track politically.

Because we can only do so much, we may very well have to scale back our expectations and let other class forces call most of the shots in some situations. There is no point in overplaying our hand. But I don't want to throw down our cards and leave the table either. If we don't speak for the working class in these united fronts, who will do it? How will the working class gain the strategic and tactical initiative that the Secretariat majority feels it now lacks? What will we do to hasten the process? And if our own politics represent nothing more than an accomodation to the other class forces we are working with, if we do not bring an independent working class perspective to these coalitions, are we really contributing anything to them that could not be better provided by others?

(Incidentally, I'm not so sure the U.S. working class is as marginal politically as the Secretariat majority feels it is. And if it is, this is a situation that can change almost overnight. It did in the 1930's, when in the space of a few years the working class went from being almost totally unorganized and under thoroughly corrupt and reactionary leadership to being <u>the</u> major revitalizing force in U.S. society. Of course, it wouldn't have happened quite like that had there not been conscious Marxist-Leninists patiently plugging away in the trenches, building an independent base and preparing to move in a big way as soon as objective conditions were more favorable.)

Conclusion

I want to close with a few words about commitment and collective struggle. I don't think there is a person in the organization who has not gone through some kind of inner turmoil around this issue at some time or other. All of us have made sacrifices. All of us have wondered whether we made the right decision, whether the gains made in the struggle are enough to justify what we have had to give up in making them. In times of

setbacks and uncertainty, our doubts can overwhelm us.

This is why we need each other, why it is so important that we continue to support and struggle with each other, respect each other, bring out the best in each other, work together to overcome the obstacles we face. Individually, the best and most capable of us can accomplish little. Working collectively, as one comrade put it, the whole is far more than the sum of its parts.

When we don't have a struggle attitude, it affects our work qualitatively (what our politics are) as well as quantitatively (how much we are able to do). A hot topic these days is whether people should be "forced" to do child care shifts (a small task, really, compared with most of what we are called upon to do). My own feeling is that if people obviously don't like being around kids, I'd just as soon they not take care of mine, and I know my kids feel the same way. But should we be unconcerned that most of the people who object to doing child care are men, while those who suffer most when it doesn't get done are invariably women?

I found out some time ago that you can't do good political work if your heart isn't in it. Commandism and guilt-tripping cannot hold an organization like ours together. Each of us deserves respect for the stand we have taken in joining; all of us have contributions to make, and everyone's contribution, however small, is important.

But while we should not be judgmental of one another, neither should we take no responsibility for each other, or feel no sense of accountability to our comrades or to the masses. If I louse up, I hope people care enough to tell me so. Criticism isn't always easy to give or take, but when it's honest and done in a spirit of respect and comradeship, we are all better for it.

Belonging to the organization should make us feel stronger, not weaker. No one should feel that their lives have become intolerable because of the demands the organization makes on them; such demands are profoundly self-defeating. If we are in danger of losing good people, people with contributions to make, because they feel they cannot live with our current cadre policy, then changes are definitely in order.

But I trust that whatever changes are made will be made within a framework of collectivity and struggle. We should never lose sight of the fact that, as human beings, we are part of a historical process that is far bigger than any one individual. Participating in that process in a conscious way is the most liberating way we can live. We won't always "do the right thing," but we can keep on trying.

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