

CORRECTIONS FOR 'SOME NOTES ON THE REVOLUTIONARY UNION'

by Gordon Fox, Berkeley local

(We are printing below a corrected version of Gordon Fox's article, Some Notes on the Revolutionary Union. It was printed in YSDB, No. 5, but a number of paragraphs on page nine were in an incorrect order.)

The Bay Area has one of the largest Maoist milieus in the country. This is due to two factors. First, the size and weight of the student movement, particularly in Berkeley, tends to cause many of our opponents to concentrate their forces in the Bay Area. Second, many burnt-out radicals have either been produced in or have gravitated towards the Bay Area. Furthermore, because of these specific characteristics, many groupings, journals, etc., have originated in the Bay Area.

The Revolutionary Union began in the Bay Area. Due to this fact and the other factors noted above, they have a relatively large presence on Bay Area campuses, particularly at the University of California's Berkeley campus, San Jose State University, and San Francisco State. They see large, central campuses such as these as their major area of work at this time, much as we do.

Because the RU has for some time been our major opponent on the UC Berkeley (Cal) campus, we have had the opportunity to observe them at close range and gain an understanding of their functioning. Our observations on their methods of functioning may be useful to comrades elsewhere, since the RU is growing nationally and seems to have been successful in establishing a campus-based front, the Revolutionary Student Brigade. What follows, then, are some observations and generalizations about the RU's functioning, rather than a political analysis of the RU. For such an analysis, comrades are referred to Jon Hillson's article "Why U. S. Maoists Fail to Form 'New Communist Party'" (Intercontinental Press, Vol. 12, No. 7, February 25, 1974), and to The Militant's articles on the RU's line in Boston.

The RU is a very serious organization. They are trying to build a nucleus of hardened Maoist cadre with the ultimate aim of building a mass Maoist party, and they have grown significantly over the past few years. For this reason, they tend to approach political developments in a serious, political manner--more like our approach than that of most other opponents. However, the organizational functioning of the RU is unique among our opponents.

The primary characteristic of the RU's functioning is frontism. It is extremely rare that the RU ever does anything in its own name. In fact, they believe that a sizable portion of their membership should be "underground," apparently in preparation for any period when this might actually be required. On the Cal campus, we have seen only two or three individuals openly identify themselves as RU members over the past several years. This is despite

the fact that they clearly have a much larger campus base; in general, RU members are rather clumsy at attempting to conceal their membership. Invariably, the "underground" members openly collaborate with "public" members, utilize the distinct RU jargon, etc. Nevertheless, their undergroundism undoubtedly hampers their ability to recruit in this period.

Undergroundism also fits in well with the RU's lack of public propaganda. The RU has no regular forum series; their occasional forums are invariably on theoretical questions and usually only attract other radicals. They do not make any effort to sell their press, either Revolution or the Bay Area Worker. At one point, some comrades at Cal were told by an RU member that it would be "incorrect" for them to sell their press like we sell The Militant and the YS. While this view is apparently no longer held by the RU, we have not seen any increase in their sales on campus or elsewhere. They occasionally have a literature table up on the Cal campus, but their table has only a few items, and few people stop at it.

Instead of functioning openly as we do, the RU functions through various fronts. For almost two years, the RU was the dominant force in the Radical Student Union (RSU) at Cal, which began as a general ultraleft group. However, the RU nationally made a decision to build the Revolutionary Student Brigade (RSB, formerly the Attica Brigade) as a campus front. This led to a split between the RU and the "independent" ultralefts in the RSU.

This split produced not only two campus groups, RSU and RSB, but at least one revealing document that we have acquired. In this document, "RSU Position Paper on Why We Didn't Join the Brigade," the real nature of the RU's frontism becomes clear. The RSUers complain that the "RU failed the RSU last year by not helping raise and in some ways actually stifling the political development of other RSU members." While this charge reflects the general ultraleft worship of abstract theory, it also shows that the RU members in the RSU tended to act in an elite, bureaucratic manner, refusing to discuss political questions and even making their own political decisions in the name of the entire group.

The RU also participated, in the name of the RSU, in the Ethnic Studies Defense Committee (ESDC), a group set up to defeat a University attack on the Ethnic Studies department, and under the domination of a rival group of Maoists. The RU waged a fight against the nationalist character of the ESDC, which ultimately led to the ESDC's

expulsion of the RU. The RSU "Position Paper" says that "this important struggle in ESDC grew for nearly two whole quarters, yet it wasn't brought to the attention of the RSU until the end of Spring quarter, and even then it came from people working in the CSCS/Committee to Save the Crim School; see the article on the Berkeley Criminology School elsewhere in the discussion bulletin after the division in ESDC had become almost explosive. During the year occasional drifts of conversation would lead RSU members to ask our representatives in ESDC what was happening but each time we were either told nothing or the 'insignificance' of the struggle was offered as a neutralizer. As it turned out the division was very serious, led to a split in ESDC. . .", etc. If this isn't convincing enough about the RU's bureaucratic methods of functioning in their fronts, another example is offered by the same RSUers: "For example, a Bay Area-wide demonstration was being planned around an expected visit by Kissinger to San Francisco. A couple independent RSU members went to what was called a preliminary planning meeting and found that they were the only non-RU people there, the meeting having been hardly publicized. There the politics, slogans, and even [ ] the leaflet was decided upon and only then was the call put out to organize other political groups and people to join in."

This sectarian approach characterizes everything the RU does. They do not consult others in an organization they're working in, they call demonstrations in their own name, etc. It is only under the most extreme circumstances that they work with others, particularly the YSA, and even then their functioning is dishonest. They frequently refuse to work with us under any conditions. For example, they completely rejected our proposal for a united action against a visit by Rockefeller to San Francisco this fall; they, after all, had already called a demonstration and were not about to let the YSA in on it.

At the center of the RU's strategy for building a "new communist party" is their vanguardism. Despite the apparent failure of the Maoist regroupment, the RU is still looking around for any already radicalized elements they can find to regroup. They do not approach newly radicalizing people, as we do. Their approach is to people who are already ultralefts. Obviously, this fits well with their frontism and lack of any independent propaganda. While they do hold actions in the name of their fronts, such as the RSB, these actions are invariably directed at drawing in the "vanguard," not broader layers.

Even when the RU attempts to reach out to broader layers, their attempts are extremely clumsy. Instead of a united front approach, they either work only with other Maoist and ultraleft groups, or set up new fronts, such as the "Worker's Committees to Throw the Bum Out," the "Bum" being Nixon. As a substitute for a united front approach, they utilize what they apparently think is language used by workers: Nixon was always a "bum," Ford is a "chump," and in response to Nixon's fall we should "Kick

'em while they're down." Obviously, this cheap substitute for politics is doomed to failure.

At the same time as the RU is hampered by these limitations, they have some advantages. Functioning as they do in the ultraleft "vanguard," they can attract others because they are well organized, disciplined, and represent the Chinese revolution in the eyes of many radicals. They can present clear and cohesive politics to fuzzy-minded radicals. This is a distinct advantage. Whether this advantage is outweighed by their bureaucratic methods or unpopular positions (e.g., opposition to nationalism and feminism) remains to be seen.

Furthermore, the RU orients to the major political questions of the day. They have oriented to the question of financial aid cutbacks at Cal, not to some secondary question. Within the mass movements, they are extremely flexible tactically, and often attract people by being more ultraleft than the ultralefts. For example, during the struggle around the Criminology School at Cal, they were the most vehement defenders of "militant actions," i.e., building occupations.

Finally, one other limitation to the RU's ability to win over significant numbers of people should be noted, aside from their general political limitations. The RU's bureaucratic methods within the mass movements sometimes go over into heckling and violence against their opponents. They carried out a vicious assault against the Spartacists at a demonstration in San Francisco last spring. When we intervened in a Criminology School forum this fall with our position of demanding the abolition of Criminology, the RU organized heckling and attempted classical Stalinist smear methods ("Your position is the same as the Chancellor's, etc."). While these methods can be attractive to ultralefts, they tend to be repulsive to broader layers of students.

The key problem for the RU is their political line. Their line on many questions is hard to swallow for many students. The RU is capable of the most crass opportunism imaginable. On the Cal campus, they have opposed the nationalist character of the Ethnic Studies struggle. They oppose the women's movement and the gay liberation movement. They are currently attempting to move into the center of the Committee to Save the Crim School, thereby revealing their fundamentally reformist line. They recently held a public forum "proving" that the Soviet Union is a capitalist country. They give back-handed support to the Democrats by abstaining from the elections. And they side with the racists in Boston. In general, they follow very closely all the twists and turns of the Maoist bureaucracy in China. These are the kinds of issues on which we want to fight the RU. In this context, an understanding of their methods of functioning can be very helpful.