

WHERE DO CORRECT LINES COME FROM? --
ON THEORY & PRACTICE IN THE PRESENT PERIOD

(A critique of Bay Area District position on the 2-line struggle in the BWC, 1974-75)

"To investigate a problem is to solve it." -- Mao.

"The living soul of Marxism is the concrete analysis of concrete conditions." -- Lenin.

"What we must do in real earnest is to criticize revisionism further and clear away its influences and manifestations, including... empiricism and dogmatism. Chairman Mao has taught us: 'Dogmatism is divorced from concrete practice, while empiricism mistakes fragmentary experience for universal truth; both kinds of opportunist thinking run counter to Marxism.' (from 'On Coalition Government'). Our struggle against revisionism includes overcoming these two erroneous tendencies, empiricism and dogmatism." -- Tien Chun ("Sole Purpose of Mastering Marxist Theory is to Apply It", Peking Review # 20, May 16, 1975.)

by the Independent Study Group

Introduction

We unite with the position that the main deviation in the Black Workers Congress has been ultra-left. In trying to develop this position and deepen our understanding of the recent two-line struggle in the BWC, we concluded that Paper X -- the Bay Area District position (#) -- has made a contribution by presenting two essential aspects not dealt with by any other position paper we have seen: 1) the importance of understanding the nature of the period we are in, and 2) the importance of emphasizing the theoretical struggle at this time. The main error of the paper is that it sees these as intellectual pursuits isolated from practice, rather than as two aspects of a dialectical process inseparable from practice. Our purpose here is to present our position through drawing out what is correct in Paper X and identifying what is incorrect.

-- Paper X is the paper presented by members of the BWC's Bay Area District entitled The Two-Line Struggle in the Organization which put forth that the main deviation in the BWC since early 1974 has been ultra-left. We call it "Paper X" to make it easier to refer to.

It should be noted that within the BWC, the left dogmatist line has been repudiated in the course of intense struggle.

in this approach is that an artificial importance is placed on the similarities with the past, and the resulting assessment of tasks may not reflect important conditions of the present.

Despite these serious failings, Paper X's recognition of the importance of determining the period was a step forward in the two-line struggle.

II. The Theoretical Struggle

Paper X proposes that we are in the party-building period, with our primary task being to win the vanguard of the proletariat to the side of Communism. Theoretical struggle is key.

Mao said in On Practice:

The real task of knowing is, through perception, to arrive at thought, to arrive step by step at the comprehension of the internal contradictions of objective things, of their laws and of the internal relations between one process and another, that is, to arrive at logical knowledge. (SW, vol. I, p. 298).

Thus, the concrete analysis of concrete conditions is the process by which we arrive at theoretical knowledge (using Marxism-Leninism as our guide).

In our view, the main problem facing the communist movement today is the lack of correct and developed positions, based on a Marxist analysis of concrete conditions. This is the struggle for correct M-L theory which will illuminate the path to Socialist Revolution. Lack of theoretical clarity is the main obstacle to ideological and organizational unity in the communist movement. That is why theoretical struggle, which is necessary to correct this, is key in this period. (Note: The struggle for correct theory will certainly continue after the formation of the party as well, but will probably no longer be the key factor in moving the struggle forward in the next period of development.)

Paper X, then, correctly identifies this as a period of theoretical struggle. However, at this point, by its dogmatic approach, the paper completely separates the development of theory from the analysis of concrete conditions. Paper X would have us retreat into the classics to "develop the line," which, once developed, could then be "taken to the masses."

I. The Period

Paper X places strong emphasis on understanding the nature of the present period in the development of the communist movement.

Our understanding of the present period is extremely important because it is the basis on which we formulate our tasks. Only by laying this foundation can we come to a correct Marxist-Leninist understanding of our tasks.

Determining the period is essential to formulating our tasks correctly, not only in the present period in the communist movement, but in all periods (stages of development of the objective or subjective factors). Paper X's weakness lies in its dogmatic approach to defining the period. On page 11 it says:

We've never given a thorough theoretical analysis of the objective and subjective conditions facing us, i. e., a class analysis of the U. S., an analysis of the communist movement, and questions of this sort. This would have to include an analysis of the period we are in.

The period we are in is not something to be "included" along with study of the objective and subjective conditions, but is determined by and arises from those conditions. The whole approach of Paper X is to give "the period" an independent existence, related to the concrete conditions, but only insofar as those conditions fit a pre-determined pattern - - in this case, Stalin's analysis of the party-building period in Russia. On page 4, Paper X says:

Of these two general periods [a) to win the vanguard of the proletariat to the side of Communism; b) to win the broad masses of workers to the side of the vanguard] it is clear that we are in the first period and need to accomplish those tasks that Stalin has laid out.

The Russian Social-Democrats determined their tasks based on their analysis of the concrete conditions in Russia at the turn of the century. We agree that the US communist movement is in a period with some similarities to the period of formation of the Social Democratic Party that Stalin described (for example, the lack of ideological unity). But our tasks develop out of our conditions. Mechanically applying the tasks of the RSD to our situation is dogmatism, not dialectical materialism. It sees Marxism-Leninism as a complete body of knowledge, not as a method to be applied to our conditions. The danger

This formulation of the process by which political line is generated, is non-Marxist-Leninist. As Comrade Mao Tse-tung observed, a correct political line should "emerge from the masses, and return to the masses." This quote is included in a part of Mao's "Appendix" xeroxed in Paper X, but the message is ignored. How can we expect to develop correct lines on the application of M-L to the U. S., if we are not trying to change reality, if we aren't even relating to reality?

This is not to say that we should conciliate with the forces that have taken Mao's quote and used it to downgrade the importance of M-L theory, to justify their own empiricism. But neither should we ignore the slogan "from the masses, to the masses" and put forward the metaphysical, idealist position that a correct political line can emerge solely out of "struggle throughout the communist movement." It is important that the organization lay out a framework for its relationship with other communists, advanced workers, and the masses.

We fundamentally unite with the position that the organization's attempting to gain hegemony and practical leadership of the whole movement (both communist & workers) was an incorrect 'left' line. (See note, bottom p. 7 below) However, Paper X itself contains a 'left' deviation that has the same ideological roots. Paper X repudiates the position that "the BWC has its line together, so let's get out there and win the movement to our position." But the line in Paper X says no one has a correct position, so we shouldn't do any practical work. "Our tasks are not based on a correct theory, or any theory for that matter." (p. 11)

On p. 13, Paper X attacks a sentence from p. 37 of the BLS, BWC, P'R pamphlet which reads: "It (party-building) means ideological preparation and theoretical training as well as practical training." Paper X attacks this sentence, saying we can't do practical work now because we don't have a correct line, that we must 'break with revisionism' in the theoretical sphere or we will have an opportunist line guiding our practice.

What Paper X does is repudiate any dialectical relation between the development of line, and practice among the masses. How are we going to determine the correct line on the Black national question, the trade union

question...how are we going to understand the class forces in the U.S., unless we are involved in practical work around these questions? Clearly we must rely not only on the practice of the international communist movement, as summed up in the theory of M-L-MTT, but also on our own practical work, which is indispensable to developing a correct line on the U.S. revolution (not "ridiculous" as Paper X states on p. 13).

Harry Haywood's letter of December 9, 1958 to the P.O. C. shows that the repudiation of the need to do practical work among the masses is not a new deviation in the communist movement:

The emergence of this leftist line was also clearly shown in the stubborn resistance to participating in concrete mass work, and fighting for a correct mass line within the Party. Certainly, the formulation and fight for a correct mass line and its implementation as an inseparable part of the fight for ideological clarity is a key task of the left forces in advancing the struggle against revisionism and conciliationism. Only in this way could the struggle be brought out of the realm of what many less developed comrades feel to be abstract theory of no particular importance to them, into the realm of practical application which these comrades could grasp more easily. For it is in the field of practical work that all differences become clearly focused at every turn -- at every point where a choice of what course of action to follow must be made. (Emphasis added.)

Any attempt to even discuss the question of mass line was stubbornly resisted. Indeed, an elaborate rationale was developed to the effect that the fight for a correct mass line was impossible without the existence of a full-fledged, national, Marxist-Leninist vanguard party. According to this argument, any local initiative would inevitably die out without national support, and would therefore be a waste of time.

It was further argued that involvement in mass work would detract our limited forces from the main job -- the struggle against the revisionists...
... This dogmatist position played right into the hands of the leadership (of the CPUSA), who were quick to take advantage of the desire of the rank and file to get to work, enabling them to adopt the posture of the great champions of mass work (reformist mass work, of course), charging the Left with obstructionism -- with seeking to prolong the inner struggle forever along abstract theoretical lines -- preventing the Party from "getting to work."

--Letter reprinted in fuller form in Class Struggle #1 (C)

The Albanian Party makes the point from another angle:

Why has the PLA (Party of Labor of Albania) not worked out a complete and comprehensive program for an historical stage of the revolution right at the beginning of that stage? The sole reason is that at the outset

it lacked sufficient of the necessary experience of revolutionary leadership. This experience is gained mainly in practical revolutionary activity. Neither Marxism-Leninism, nor the experience of a fraternal party can ever give the working class party of this or that country a political line ready-made and complete. Besides the Marxist-Leninist theory which illuminates the road and besides the experience of the fraternal parties which helps, for the revolutionary Party of the working class its own revolutionary experience is absolutely necessary in working out its political line." — (The Vanguard of the Revolution & Socialist Construction — Albania Today 1 (2) 1972 p. 3)

While it is incorrect for an organization to be trying to gain hegemony or overall leadership of the workers' movement at this time (##), it is not incorrect to be trying to move struggles forward, based on the political lines we do have. What else can we do, really, unless we are only going to take notes at union meetings, not put anything forward.

For example, in its section on the Boston Busing article, Paper X would essentially have us "contemplating the proletariat's rear" — completely underestimating the strides already taken theoretically, and reneging on our proletarian internationalist duty to combat national oppression and incipient fascism in our practical work.

It is a gross exaggeration to say "there have not been polemics among communists with the aim of reaching unity on a correct line (on the national question)" - p. 28 of Paper X. This position throws history out the door and belittles the struggles that have ^{gone on previously,} / as well as the line struggle that did occur around Boston (for example, the forum initiated by CAP). While the M/L movement has not completely broken with the revisionist line of the CPUSA by any means, there have been strong steps made in this direction.

The national question is at least one area where the pre-party groups have been trying to develop a line that does not conciliate with the CPUSA's negation of the national question. Some of the groups hold that there is a Black nation (i. e., that fits the Marxist-Leninist definition of a nation as laid out by

— We are not saying that communist organizations and individuals should not fight for the political line they believe to be correct, and seek to win over others. We are saying that no organization today has a grasp of US objective and subjective conditions sufficiently correct and developed to justify their seeking organizational hegemony. (Sooner or later, of course, and as soon as possible, there will be only one communist party, with a single political line, and only those belonging to it will be justified in calling themselves communists.)

Stalin), and that the right of self-determination is the correct M/L stand. This is in fact a line. What needs to be done now is to develop the line based on more thorough concrete analysis of the concrete conditions in the U.S. Unfortunately, Paper X says very little about how the struggle for line is to be carried out, and much of what it says is incorrect. Paper X says we can't do any practical work, so where is this line going to come from? Study alone?? Polemics with other communists alone?

No, investigation must be done on the reality of the Black nation, and the investigation cannot be done without practice, without mass work, that relates to this question. This means doing practical work within the Black Belt as well as within the Black national minority community/outside the Black Belt. (and among whites) How can we have a correct developed line if we have only a partial and fragmentary knowledge of the objective conditions? We cannot have a good grasp of the objective conditions unless we have contact through practical work. We will never understand the nature of class and national struggle unless we engage in class & national struggle.

For instance, most comrades agree that the BWC's former position on the "thoroughly comprador" nature of the Black bourgeoisie was incorrect and arrived at without adequate struggle and investigation. But this doesn't just mean that there wasn't enough "struggle throughout the communist movement as it exists" (Paper X) -- it also means there wasn't enough struggle with the Black bourgeoisie in practical activity, and/or there wasn't scientific, systematic sum-up of this experience.

A correct understanding, a correct position on the Black national question requires more than abstract "struggle within the communist movement" :

- 1) It requires a theoretical understanding of the knowledge gained by other communist parties (including the CPUSA in the '30s and '40s) about the national question.
- 2) It requires doing research into the already available information about the position of Black people in America (from bourgeois economists, sociologists, etc.; social-democrats, etc.; as well as various M/L sources.)
- 3) It requires social investigation by communists engaged in practical work, in political and economic class struggle, in the national and class struggles of the Black people.

The struggle for a correct position on the Black national question (and for a correct position on other questions also) must be based on all 3 of these requirements, otherwise we will fall into empiricism or dogmatism in our polemics and our practice.

IV. Paper X and the Left Dogmatist Line in the Black Workers Congress

Since the split from its association with the RU, the BWC line on the relation of theory and practice has gone through two phases. The first phase was characterized by a "tactical retreat" from the mass movement. The prevailing view was that communists must "get their shit together" first, then engage in practical work. The second phase, symbolized by the slogan "Organization Is Key," was marked by the view that we now have a correct line on all major questions, and communists should now go out and lead the mass movement (without investigation or understanding of the masses or objective conditions generally). Both views were 'left' errors, absolutizing the role of communists, and come from the same ideological roots — idealism and metaphysics. The BWC line had broken with the empiricism of the RU, only to fall prey to the equally dangerous error of dogmatism.

Paper X breaks with one aspect of the left dogmatist line. It attacks the line of the ultralefts that "organization is key" in this period; on the grounds that this line "skips the stage of ideological struggle" necessary to achieve ideological and organizational unity in the communist movement. We agree with this analysis, as far as it goes, while disagreeing with the dogmatic view of "ideological struggle" which Paper X has proved unable to shake off.

For the ultralefts, it was now possible for communists to define their main task as "marching at the head of the working class movement." They held that a generally correct line had been arrived at through "theoretical struggle" and study of some of the classics. In this view, we had made a break with revisionist ideas and political lines by opposing them with Marxist-Leninist ideas and lines from the Comintern. Therefore, we had a general line which should unite the communist movement, and if others didn't unite with it they were "revisionists and opportunists." Paper X attacked this view, finding, with Stalin, that "organization is key" is a correct slogan and presents us with correct tasks

only after a correct political line has been laid down (which is obviously not the situation today).

But despite this correct criticism, Paper X's break with the left dogmatist line was not thorough-going. While more modest and less blatantly idealist than the ultralefts of the old BWC national center, Paper X still viewed theory and political line as existing in some separate sphere. Correct political line, it held, can be acquired primarily in this separate subjective realm and then applied to the objective conditions.

The error common to both is the denial, in different degrees, of the primacy of the material over the ideal. Both see Marxism-Leninism as a body of perfect ideas existing timelessly. Both Paper X and the "organization is key" line of the ultralefts make the fundamental error of divorcing Marxism-Leninism from its dialectical & historical materialist basis and thereby transforming it from a science into a body of dogmas.

The "organization is key" line carries this further in that it goes on to seek to impose its dogmatic understanding onto the material world -- seeing society and the masses as inert matter to be moved by the conscious element. There is a connection between this position and voluntarism, which holds that you can change conditions by imposing your will on them. Voluntarism absolutizes the subjective factor, negating the development of objective conditions independent of man's will.

The BWC ultralefts went through a phase of what they called "tactical retreat" (from practice), in which a version of "theoretical struggle" was seen as the key task. After some superficial study of the classics, they emerged ready to lead the revolution in the U.S. The Paper X authors, on the other hand, thought that point hadn't been reached yet, that what was needed was more study of the classics (also in isolation from practice). Basically both represented the same ultra-left line, in different phases of its development.

The Paper X authors had the strength of recognizing that their study, and the study and practice of the communist movement generally, had not yet provided an understanding sufficient to be called a guiding line for revolution. But this recognition alone was not enough to break with the 'left' line. What was required

was a recognition that their whole approach to developing a political line was incorrect.

Conditions in the US today aren't identical with conditions that existed elsewhere 40 or 70 years ago. A correct political line must reflect these changes. This cannot be accomplished by a study of Marxist-Leninist works alone, but requires study, investigation and practice in the material world, in society. It is in the material world that the laws formulated by the science of Marxism-Leninism operate.

It is definitely true -- our struggle against revisionism includes overcoming the poisonous error of dogmatism.

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BWC

LAST SECTION

"PAPER X" & THE LEFT DOGMATIST LINE IN THE BWC

Since the split w from its association with the RU, the BWC a line on the relation of theory and practice has gone through two phases -- \$ The first was characterized by a retreat from the mass movement. The prevailing view was that communists must "get their shit together" ~~as first~~, then engage in practical work. ~~Thussax~~ The second phase, symbolized by the slogan "organization is key," was marked by the view that we now have the correct line on all major questions, and communists should now go out and lead the mass movement (without investigation or understanding of the masses or objective conditions generally

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Paper X breaks with one aspect of the left dogmatist line, in its attack on the for "skipping the stage of ideological struggle". "organization is key" line/ But as we have seen, its break with the left dogmatist line was not thorough-going. For example, take Paper X's line on ideological struggle. It shares with the ultraleft of the old BWC national center a dogmatic understanding of theory and political line. Paper X, while more ~~modest~~ modest and less blatantly idealist, still views theory and political line as existing in some separate subjective sphere. ~~Corrsc~~ t political line, it holds, can be acquired primarily in this separate subjective realm and then applied to the objective conditions.

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Paper X had the strength of recognizing that their study ~~was~~ and practice, and that of the ~~Communist~~ communist movement generally, had not yet provided them with an understanding sufficient to be called a guiding line for a revolution. But if the "Paper X" comrades stopped at this recognition alone, they would degenerate into endless ~~academic~~ debating over interpretations of dogma.

~~Conditions~~ ^{Conditions} today aren't identical with conditions that existed 40 or 70 years ago. A correct political line must reflect these ~~a~~ changes. This ~~can~~ cannot be accomplished by a study of Marxist-Leninist works alone, but require, study, investigation and practice in the material world, in society. It is in the material world that the laws formulated by the science of Marxism-Leninism operate.

* C.L.
+ another recent example