

# An exchange on party-building and the Guardian Clubs

## Silber: Is this "hegemonism"?

Irwin Silber of the Guardian.



by IRWIN SILBER

In the last two issues of the *Organizer* (October & November), Clay Newlin has put forward certain criticisms of the *Guardian*. The essence of his criticisms was to charge the *Guardian* on two counts: an attempt at hegemonism in the party-building movement in the US and an "even-handed" view of Eurocommunism.

It is unfortunate that Newlin has put himself in the position of clouding over genuine points of political difference between the *Guardian* and the PWOC with these unfounded charges.

Concerning hegemonism, Newlin charges that the *Guardian's* plan to establish a network of *Guardian* Clubs "amounts to an attempt by the *Guardian* to set itself up as a center for the Marxist-Leninist trend." Now I do not mean to quibble over words, but it strikes me immediately that there is a significant difference between "a" center and "the" center and Newlin should explain what he means. He says "a center" but he seems to mean "the center."

The difference between these two should be readily apparent. Party-building, after all, does not proceed from a set formula. Given the particular circumstances of our own movement, it would seem virtually inevitable that several "centers" would emerge. The PWOC obviously sees itself at the center of one such "center".

Most readers are undoubtedly familiar with a number of the questions on which there have been differences between the *Guardian* and the various "trend" organizations associated with the PWOC. We have put forward our views in the pages of the *Guardian* and have provided space for these groups to respond. In addition, the *Guardian* has from the beginning maintained an active interest in the efforts initiated by the PWOC to develop a national ideological center and to establish an ideological journal.

Newlin says that "they (*Guardian*) have been requested to attend meetings, participate in discussions, and make concrete proposals as to what course of action should be followed." The inference is that the *Guardian* has not responded to these invitations. The fact is that we have attended every such meeting to which we have been invited and we have on several occasions very forcefully put forward our views on party-building, questions of international line, and others.

But it did not take us long to realize that on a number of questions we stood alone against all the other groups in the "trend". Indeed, it also became clear to us that some groups were dubious that the *Guardian's* representatives really belonged in this process since it was "only a newspaper" and "did not have direct connections with the working-class movement".

To be completely frank about it, we felt that this attitude toward the *Guardian* was itself a sign of the "trend's" political immaturity. We found among some a marked glorification of localism, an idealization of "workerism", a strong tendency toward economism and a tendency to conciliate with revisionism. It seemed to us that the PWOC's theory of "fusion" tended to reinforce some of these negative tendencies and provide an excuse for perpetuating localism.

As a result, it became difficult for us to judge the merits of the general plan for creating a national ideological center because of the relatively primitive level of development of many of the leading forces who were undertaking it.

### CRITICIZE FEDERATIONISM

Our own view, which we expressed many times over, was that the plan as it was unfolding seemed to lead inevitably toward a form of federationism in party-building. We also argued that there were some positive aspects to the experiences of the October League and the Revolutionary Union in their creation of national organizational forms from the outset. For this we were accused of not having made a thorough break with dogmatism.

Meanwhile, the *Guardian* had its own very pressing problems to solve. Everyone knows the price we paid for our stand on Angola and for the public discussions on China's foreign policy which we initiated in the pages of our paper. Our sponsorship of tours to China — an important source of supplemental income to us — was cancelled. Bookstores managed by dogmatists and flunkies stopped carrying the *Guardian*. Our public meetings were harassed. Subscribers and Sustainers were urged to cancel their support.

And yet we knew that we were expressing the views of large numbers of Marxist-Leninists in the US — while providing indispensable information and guidance to a large body of progressives and anti-imperialists. A few of the "trend" groups rallied to our support but for a variety of reasons — both objective and subjective — this was really only a drop in the bucket.

It was obvious that the "solution" to our immediate problems was to be found primarily through our own efforts and from the support we would receive from those who particularly valued our political line. In response to an appeal to expand our Sustainer program, hundreds of *Guardian* readers — many at great personal sacrifice — signed up. The loss in both Sustainers and readers was quickly made up by others.

But to sustain this effort, a more permanent support structure was required. We had already accumulated some experience in this regard with the *Guardian* bureaus

which performed many of the functions the Clubs now handle from news-gathering to circulation and fund-raising. At several "trend" meetings we raised this question and urged the various groups to see the value of having a national weekly newspaper under Marxist-Leninist leadership and to assume some responsibilities for news-gathering, circulation building, and financial support. Two of the groups became Sustainers — as groups — which was greatly appreciated, but of course in financial terms this did not make any measurable dent in our difficulties. There were some good contributions — from these same groups — with occasional news articles on developments in their cities.

But by and large, this work in relation to the *Guardian* was a very low priority among the "trend" groups. Undoubtedly, they had other matters to take up which were of greater immediacy to them, but we also felt that there was an underestimation of the importance of having this national voice of our movement survive and expand. In any event, the need for self-reliance was underscored.

This is the "practical" framework for our plan for developing a *Guardian* Clubs network. We have never disguised this. We have said that "supporting and building the *Guardian*... will be the chief form of practical activity for the Clubs." The three activities we have stressed are circulation, newsgathering, and fund-raising.

The other work of the *Guardian* Clubs is collective study and local political activity.

### CLUBS AND PARTY-BUILDING

It is our belief that this effort by the *Guardian* will objectively strengthen the party-building movement in several key respects:

1. It will introduce a concrete national organizational form into a political tendency which has not yet developed any other national form. This can help overcome the sluggishness of the localist and small-circle mentality which everyone concedes still operates in the movement.
2. It will help train a body of party-building cadre in both common theoretical work and in common practice.
3. It will enable the *Guardian* to initiate certain political undertakings.
4. It will help ensure the survival and expansion of the one national political voice of the anti-revisionist, anti-dogmatist tendency.

Is this hegemonism?

The number of *Guardian* Clubs will not exceed ten in the first year (five are already organized) and the size of each Club will be limited. In other words, we

are not trying to set up the only organization in town, we are not "raiding" other groups or suggesting that other organizational forms have no right to exist. We plan to continue consulting with various local Marxist-Leninist organizations and develop coalition work with them as well as debates, forums, and discussions.

Does any of this sound like hegemonism?

Newlin says that "the most highly developed of our forces are organized into local organizations and collectives" and suggests that the membership of the *Guardian* Clubs will be made up of less developed individuals. But this is a very provincial perspective. Already, *Guardian* Clubs have attracted a good number of developed Marxist-Leninists who up until now have been primarily active in mass organizations or mass work and for a variety of reasons have not joined a local Marxist-Leninist collective. After all, there are certainly many independent Marxist-Leninists who have some significant political differences with their local "trend" organization and whose own views correspond more closely to the *Guardian's*. This is readily apparent in those cities where we have already established *Guardian* Clubs.

In addition, the Clubs start out with a core of people experienced in the work of the several *Guardian* Bureaus. They are hardly a group of political "left-overs" and "misfits".

Newlin's charge of hegemonism is politically reckless. It tends to cast doubt on the political integrity of the *Guardian* and could, therefore, weaken our efforts to develop a sound material base. It should be withdrawn. Let the ideological debates continue — but this is an organizational attack that could have serious consequences. It is neither merited by the facts nor is it to the credit of the PWOC.

### ON EUROCOMMUNISM

Concerning Eurocommunism, I fear that on this matter Newlin has succumbed to the temptation to score a cheap shot at the *Guardian* rather than to reflect accurately our position. Taking into account the series of four articles which I wrote for the *Guardian* on this subject last spring as well as a lengthy two-part editorial, there is certainly no basis for saying that the *Guardian* has an "even-handed" approach to Eurocommunism.

On the other hand, Newlin seems to feel that even the expression of "independence" by the Eurocommunist parties is, on the balance, negative. The problem, I'm afraid, is that Newlin doesn't appreciate the reactionary nature of Soviet hegemonism. The independence of the Eurocommunist parties hasn't made them any more "revolutionary". But they were thoroughly revisionist long before they asserted their independence. No one can seriously suggest that the French and Italian parties based themselves on basic Leninist strategic conceptions — the nature of the state, the dictatorship of the proletariat, armed struggle, etc. — during the sixties. So the *new* element in the process — besides the formality of dropping certain phrases — is precisely the independence from the Soviet Union.

To make this point is hardly being soft on Eurocommunism or "evenhanded" about it. Newlin knows better. The comment was not worthy of him nor the organization for which he speaks.

One last note. We have no desire for yet one more "split" in a Marxist-Leninist movement already incredibly fractionalized. It is a mark of seriousness in politics that ideological differences be fully and honestly aired while maintaining respect for the organizational integrity of the various forces. These two articles by Newlin, however, begin to go over that delicate borderline.