

The election of Ronald Reagan has had a profound effect on the US. A landslide victory by a politician only recently dismissed by the capitalist media as too right-wing to survive in American politics can only be seen as decisive evidence of the growing strength of reaction. Reagan in the White House and the Congressional Republican/Southern Democrat majority stand as a clear ~~danger~~ threat to the gains of the working class and all oppressed groups, a symbol of the rise of the Right and its imminent attack.

This disquieting event has posed two urgent questions to the Left: How do we understand the mounting attack on these people, its basis in the current crisis of capitalism, and its expression in the rightward shift of the US government? What role can the Left play in the response to this attack.

One assessment of the present situation which is popular on the Left sums it up as a "rising fascist danger", which consequently requires a basically anti-fascist strategic response. We disagree with this response. While we consider fascism to be a danger, we don't think that it's the principal aspect of this period. In this 2-part opinion, we will first critique the "fascist danger" perspective and then, in part 2, present our own views on the present crisis and the appropriate strategic ~~response~~ response.

In these pages, as well as in its own ~~own~~ journal, the Line of March editorial board has recently argued that the threat posed by Reagan and the rise of/the Right is essentially a fascist one, and that the correct communist response is to build a United Front against Fascism, modeled on the strategy of the Communist International after 1935. LoM's approach is therefore useful as the most sophisticated pre-

sentation of this position. Therefore, it provides a good basis for comparing the contrasting analyses of the nature of the current crisis. The differing implications for left activity arising from each analysis should not be minimized.

For proponents of the "fascist danger" argument, the current period is characterized by an "imperialist offensive" on the part of US capital, or perhaps, more accurately a counter-offensive, aimed at "reversing the anti-imperialist tide." This offensive consists of an increasingly militarist stance internationally, financed by a domestic social austerity program, made palatable to the masses by fagging a white "patriotic" consensus, and buttressed politically b-y a rising far-right political tendency.

This last feature^(space)-designated a "definite fascist tendency"—becomes the heart of the matter because, according to LOM, the "main sectors of finance capital have linked up with the extreme right wing politically." The evidence: that Reagan, "the right wing's principle ideologue," was able to win the backing of the "Eastern Establishment". Furthermore, the imperialist offensive — ~~the~~ drive toward war and "racially defined social austerity" — will "require finance capital to increasingly cement its ties with the far rightx."

No one on the Left denies that there has been a shift toward more aggressive, right wing policies within the capitalist state. But to ~~xxxx~~ assert that this rightward shift can only mean the rise of fascism simply will not do, for the history of capitalism, internationally and in the US, shows that not every orga-nized attack on the conditions of the people is an expression of fascism. XN

In order to assess the true nature of the fascist danger, we must understand its distinguishing features—not the ever-present

fascism of the KKK or Nazis, but the process of replacement of bourgeois democracy by a fascist state as a result of the class struggle. We feel the following ^{points} ~~are~~ constitute a Marxist-Leninist view of the elements of fascism.

*Fascism is a qualitatively different form of state power from bourgeois democracy. Historically, bourgeois democracy, with its breadth and flexibility, is the form of state power that most closely corresponds to capitalism. As a result, fascism has arisen only under specific and exceptional conditions.

*Fascism is a particular outcome of a capitalist crisis- economic, political, and ideological - in which the contradictions within the ruling class and between the ruling class and the masses ^{that} must be resolved in order to overcome the crisis, cannot be resolved through bourgeois democratic means.

*Fascism is based on a new kind of political alliance between monopoly capital and the petit bourgeoisie, which replaces the traditional bourgeois democratic political alignment that proved unable to resolve the crisis.

*This alliance is made possible ^{because} the middle classes ~~are~~ are radicalized by the crisis and transfer their traditional political allegiance from the old bourgeois parties to new fascist organizations. These middle classes then become a mass base for the developing fascist movement.

*The capitalist crisis which gives rise to fascism finds the working class strong enough economically to constitute a considerable obstacle to capital's smooth resolution of the crisis, but too weak to constitute an alternative pole of attraction sufficient to win over the radicalized middle classes.

Do the specific and exceptional conditions that make the emer -

gence of fascism a serious danger currently exist in the US? We think not. A capitalist crisis certainly exists: the economy has been on a downward slide for nearly a decade, while rising militarism and deepening class, racial, and sexual contradictions have increased the extent of the social crisis. But to date there is no evidence to suggest that the ruling class offensive required by the crisis cannot be conducted entirely within the tradition of bourgeois democracy.

← This offensive is itself a serious danger, the danger of a qualitatively new form of capitalist/ reaction. But it is simply not the case that the exploitation of militarism, nationalism, racism, and sexism cannot be developed within the framework of US bourgeois democracy which has always employed them.

Similarly, there is no evidence that the differences within the ruling class itself cannot be resolved through bourgeois democratic means. In the US, the/hegemony of monopoly capital over the other sections of capital and the middle ~~xxxx~~ classes remains unchallenged. There is no incapacitating contradiction within the ruling alliance (such as the presence of anachronistic ~~dominant~~ classes like the semi-feudal large landowners in Germany and Italy in the 1920's and '30's) that could prevent monopoly capital from seeking a solution to the crisis on its own terms.

There is also no evidence that the middle ~~xxx~~ classes have been radicalized to the point that they are ceasing to support the Democrats and Republicans. Far from it. Perhaps the most striking feature of the last election was the reaffirmation of the two-party system. Reduced to the status of a seemingly permanent opposition in Congress, the Republicans had been subordinate to the Democratic majority even when they held the presidency. In the last election, however, the Republicans re-emerged as a full partner in bourgeois politics. The third party initiatives, on the other hand, fared poorly. And

while the resurgence of the Republican party is frightening evidence of a shift to the right, to see the GOP as the "fascist" alternative to the traditional bourgeois representation of the Democrats would be far-fetched in the extreme.

Finally, the US working class has not in recent history had the organizational power or consciousness to seriously challenge the ideological legitimacy of bourgeois democracy or the ability of capital to resolve crises on its own terms. The leaders of the working class have predominantly been labor bureaucrats and, at best, social democrats. Far from posing visions of a revolutionary alternative to the present ~~xxx~~ crisis, the ~~xxx~~ working class has for decades been integrated into the variety of bourgeois democratic institutions within which it fruitlessly struggles for moderation of the worst features of its class oppression.

For these reasons, we think it is incorrect to claim that the threat posed by the current situation is one of fascism. But what is at stake in such an error is not only, as LOM claims, the danger of "crying wolf": that sounding the alarm for fascism prematurely would leave the Left and the people insensitive to that danger when it actually arises. What is also at stake is the effectiveness of the strategy for the Left and the mass movements in the current crisis. Any strategy for fighting a danger that does not actually predominate must necessarily weaken the struggle against the main danger that does exist.

The unfortunate fact is that the US communist movement has more than enough experience in fighting dangers that are not in fact posed, and especially in fighting a fictitious fascism. Indeed, historically, the two most ~~prominent~~ prominent communist strategies

for work in the mass movement have been predicated on fighting fascism as the main threat to the people. These are the two strategies employed by the CPUSA in the 1930's under the direction of the Comintern. One a left form and the other a right form, these strategies live on as the models adopted by most communist organizations today.

During the ultra-left "third period" (1929-34), the CPUSA viewed the Great Depression as the long-awaited final breakdown of capitalism. Denying any possibility of capitalism rejuvenating itself, the CP assumed that capital would have to turn to fascism in order to survive. Seeing the only progressive outcome of the crisis as revolution and the only regressive outcome as fascism, the Party's practice was consistently ultra-left and sectarian. All social democratic opposition to cries for revolution (and to the CP) was labelled "social fascist". In the labor movement, the CP established dual "~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ "revolutionary" unions, whose charters called for the "dictatorship of the proletariat."

In 1935, the Party's line and practice shifted, again following the shift in the Comintern. The CP's new analysis concluded that the US was no longer in a revolutionary situation, so its "revolutionary" tactics were no longer in order. Instead, the only possible outcomes of the crisis were fascism or democracy. The new strategy was the United Front against Fascism, which was to unite all anti-fascist forces in the struggle to preserve democracy.

The United Front line was a welcome change from "third period" sectarianism. During the United Front period, the CPUSA became the largest and most influential revolutionary organization in US history. The party's mass work, especially its crucial role in building the CIO, continues to inspire communists today,

holding out the hope of equivalent influence in the mass movements in the future. But the United Front line and ~~xx~~ strategy continued to suffer from targetting ~~x~~ fascism that wasn't on the agenda, and in the end became outright class collaborationism.

By narrowing the possible outcomes of the crisis to fascism or democracy, the Party remained oblivious to the question that was actually at hand: what form of bourgeois democracy? By labelling all reactionary forces "fascist", the Party obscured the critical differences within the "anti-fascist" camp. ^{Just} /as all opposition to the New Deal was seen as "fascist", all supporters were labelled "democratic." Over time, the Party increasingly tailed after the "progressive" wing of the bourgeoisie and its allies in the mass movements, in the interests of "fighting fascism". Thus, the New Deal, and Roosevelt himself, became equated with the anti-fascist struggle for democracy to ^{the} point where ^{CP} they supported the Democrats in the 1938 election "without hesitation".

While there certainly were places in the world that confronted fascism as the main danger at that time, the US was not one of them; ~~and~~ nor is it the main threat today, for many of the same reasons. Guided by strategies that took as their keystone the imminent threat of fascism, the CPUSA remained insensitive to the transformation actually taking place: the development of an interventionist form of the bourgeois democratic state that would renew US capitalism and coopt the mass movements through Keynesian economic policies, and ^{achieve} a dominant position within world imperialism which was to go unchallenged for decades. Oblivious to this process, the CP was unable to effectively intervene to the maximum advantage of the working class and oppressed people.

On a more recent note, during the Nixon presidency, the October League (presently the CP(ML)) interpreted Watergate and the shift

to the right as also representing a rising fascist danger, before the absurdity of that position became apparent. Then, as now, those faithful to the idea of uncritically reproducing 1930's Marxism in a modern context have been unable to understand the long term strength and stability of bourgeois democracy ^{blinded} as they are by a narrow anti-fascist point of view.

We have seen some of the historical dangers inherent in basing a communist strategy in this period on combatting the rise of fascism. At the same time, such a strategy has the following theoretical and political implications:

1) It reproduces the capitalist ideological myth about the wonderful nature of bourgeois democracy by treating every significant attack on the masses as fascist; that is, outside the parameters of bourgeois democracy. This narrow and static view of bourgeois ^{reactionary} ~~democracy~~ democracy seeks to define the current/offensive of capital only in its relation to fascism: as an expression of fascism, or ^{immediate} leading to it. With fascism not on the agenda, this view obstructs all analysis of struggles that are currently taking place within bourgeois democracy and threatens to disorient our activity in those struggles.

2) It reduces the various possible transformations of the bourgeois state and bourgeois politics as a result of the current crisis to only one: fascism. It is typical of the economic determinism that has dominated Marxism not only in the CP but throughout the communist movement today that every economic crisis automatically signals the breakdown of capitalism, to which the bourgeoisie's only possible response is fascism. This mechanistic schema does not allow for the possibility that a crisis can result in ~~x~~ substantial changes

within bourgeois democracy itself. Yet historically, every major economic crisis in the US has done ~~more~~ precisely that. Such changes have altered, and can alter, the terrain of class struggle dramatically, raising the possibility of advances and reverses for the working class. But those who remain obsessed with a revolution which is not ready to happen or a fascism which is not around the corner remain blind to the real opportunities which a serious crisis presents.

Uncritically

3) It looks to the history of the CP in the 1930s for guidance on analysis, strategy and tactics in ~~such~~ a way that invites repetition of past errors. Those who target fascism as the main danger in this period generally adopt either third period ultra-leftism or the united front against fascism as a model for ~~their~~ ~~their~~ their own strategy. While most organizations give these strategies their own twist, none ~~does~~ ^{does} a serious critique of the theoretical bases of the strategy ~~nor~~ its practical consequences in history.

No strategy mechanically transposed from the ~~the~~ past and aimed at a mythical danger can unify the left's work or serve the masses in their current struggles. If we are to chart a way forward in the current period, we must break with ~~the~~ legacy of US communist history both in the way we analyze the current crisis and in the strategy and tactics we employ. Our own approach to the present crisis and the Left's strategic response will be discussed in Part 2 of this opinion.