

Part I

Growth of Reaction and the Danger of Fascism

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The last year has seen a mounting tide of reaction -- an intensification of attacks on the democratic rights and living standards of the oppressed nationalities, women and the working class. Desegregation of schools and housing has been crippled and affirmative action programs placed in jeopardy. The right of women to abortion has been curtailed and the passage of the ERA is in doubt. Anti-discrimination laws have been repealed. Cutbacks at federal, state and local levels threaten vital social services and the so-called tax revolt, symbolized by Proposition 13, threatens to bring this development to crisis proportions. Efforts to pass right-to-work laws and de-certify unions are making headway in a number of key industrial states. The police, FBI and the courts continue to abuse the rights of citizens. An increasingly powerful lobby calls for a more aggressive anti-Soviet foreign policy and beefed up defense spending.

These are not isolated developments. Taken together they represent a definite policy -- a response by one section of the ruling class, that is, the owners of the monopoly corporations, to the present day dilemma of US capitalism.

What is the nature of this reaction? What are its prospects and how can it be fought? These are burning questions for all those who desire social progress. Marxist-Leninists have a particular responsibility to answer these questions in the clearest fashion.

THE ROOTS OF REACTION

Monopoly capitalism or imperialism tends toward political reaction by its very nature. The drive of the monopolies for super profits sharpens the contradictions between the bourgeoisie on the one hand and the masses of exploited and oppressed on the other. Imperialism intensifies the exploitation of the working class, deepens national and sexual oppression and subjugates peoples abroad. Its drive for new markets to plunder leads to war. Its internal contradictions produce uneven economic development, instability and crisis. Such a system can only uneasily exist with even the most limited forms of democracy. Monopoly by its very nature seeks to curtail democracy and political freedom, attack the living standards of the masses and maintain inequality.

At the same time, the popular forces seek to check the tendency toward reaction. Depending on the degree of organization and consciousness of the masses, this tendency can be checked and concessions won. The balance of class forces is invariably a factor in shaping bourgeois policy.

The struggle between reaction and the progressive forces occurs in a specific historical context. The options of the monopolists are not limitless but are shaped and circumscribed by definite political, social and economic realities. Also the monopoly capitalist class is rarely, if ever of one mind as to what set of policies will best serve its interests. There is invariably a struggle between contending groups who represent divergent, if limited, ideological outlooks.

Thus while the monopoly capitalist class is firmly united in its determination to maintain its rule, within that framework real and often sharp differences exist as to what policies best serve the overall interests of the class. This explains the existence of a bourgeois political spectrum with a left, a center and a right and with contending liberal, moderate and conservative outlooks and programs.

REACTION IN THE U.S.

Following WWII, owing to the devastation of its imperialist rivals, US capital was able to gain a predominant position in the world. This produced a period of relative stability and economic growth in the US, providing the context to dull the edge of mass resistance while isolating and repressing its most advanced expressions. When in the early 1960's the upsurge of the struggle for Black liberation posed a real threat, US capital was able to combine significant concessions with repression.

The defeat of the US in Vietnam and the launching of Nixon's New Economic Program marked a turning point and the beginning of a new period. While still a powerful political, economic and military force, the US has lost its position of pre-eminence. The spread of socialism, the rising tide of national liberation and the sharpened competition from imperialist rivals have all contributed to the weakened position of US capital and sharply restricted the options open to the monopolists at home.

The result was a new consensus in leading monopoly circles. During the Vietnam years, the ruling class was deeply split, divisions that produced the sharpest reverberations in the Democratic Party. These differences centered on the expediency of the war and how to best cope with domestic insurgency. The ending of the war and the onset of economic crisis substantially reduced the weight of these divisions. Carter's triumph in the Democratic Party and Ford's victory in the Republican signalled the emergence of the new consensus. While differences between the two existed, what was striking was the broad common ground they shared.

The dominant elements of monopoly united on a policy of austerity and both Carter and Ford called on the U.S. people to bite the bullet. Wage "restraint", high unemployment and cutbacks in essential social services are the new marching orders. A moratorium on any further concessions to the demands of the oppressed nationalities and women for equality is a necessary feature of this general policy.

Now a new cleavage is coming to the fore. A growing section of the monopolists are going over to the standpoint of extreme reaction. The New Right, as it has come to be known, is not content to hold the line in the face of the demands of the masses. Instead they call for an across the board roll-back of the gains of the last decades, a sharpening of the attacks on minorities, women and unions. Within the Republican Party Ronald Regan is the rallying point for these forces. The remnants of the Wallace movement and Democrats like Frank Rizzo belong to the same camp. The

right-to-lifers, the right-to-workers and the crusaders against communism are organized in hundreds of "non-partisan" organizations that are closely tied ideologically to the monopoly circles who constitute the real motive force of the New Right. On its fringes are the outright fascist groupings like the Nazis and the KKK.

As a growing political force, well-financed and well-organized, the New Right has scored a number of far-reaching successes—both at the local and national level. A serious bid for national political power can be expected in 1980 in the form of a presidential candidacy.

IS THE NEW RIGHT A FASCIST TREND?

If such a bid were successful would this mean the coming of fascism to the U.S.? This is an important question. How we answer it will shape the strategy and tactics we adopt in fighting the New Right.

Certainly the rhetoric and program of the New Right share important common ground with fascism. Ideologically, the New Right and fascism—be it Hitler's Nazis or the KKK—rely heavily on racism, sexism, national chauvinism and anti-communism. It is also unquestionably true that some New Rightists have open fascist sympathies.

Nevertheless, the New Right at the present time cannot be regarded as a fascist trend, although its prospects are by no means unrelated to the danger of fascism. Fascism is more than a program of bourgeois reaction, even an extreme program. It is a change in the form of class rule. Fascism aims at substituting terror and open dictatorship for bourgeois democratic institutions.

Some might argue that the overthrow of democratic forms is the aim of the New Right, but one they do not dare openly proclaim. In other words they are closet fascists who once in power can be expected to impose a ruthless dictatorship.

Two points call this argument into question. First, fascism has generally taken the form of an anti-parliamentary, anti-democratic mass movement. It has not realized its aims by accommodating itself to bourgeois democratic sentiment and then staging a coup. The road to fascism is prepared through a systematic assault on democratic institutions, both in the form of propaganda and terror. Hitler, Mussolini and Franco all openly spoke out against the "impotence" of the democratic state and matched their words with the para-military Brownshirts, squadristi, and Falange.

Secondly, fascism develops in response to definite historical conditions. It arises in a situation where the bourgeoisie is increasingly unable to rule by ordinary means. It assumes an intense level of class struggle—a social crisis in which class forces hostile to monopoly threaten the whole fabric of capitalist rule. In such a situation the dominant forces within the bourgeoisie turn to fascism. Fascism represents counter-revolution. In Europe it came to power as the vengeance the bourgeoisie took on the revolutionary working class.

Taking these points together we see that the New Right falls short of being a fascist trend. While the rightists favor measures that will restrict democratic rights, they are careful to abstain from any frontal assault on parliamentary institutions and constitutional principles. In fact they couch their appeal in terms of loyalty to these principles. The task for the New Right is to win over the decisive sections of the bourgeoisie to its program. Fascism, the advocacy of the overthrow of bourgeois democratic institutions in order to consolidate reaction, will hardly aid them in the pursuit of this objective.

The monopoly capitalist class as a whole has moved to the right. Its liberal wing is relatively isolated. Its right wing is growing in strength. The dominant center has shifted rightward but is not yet prepared to embrace the program of the New Right.

No important section of the bourgeoisie is presently committed to fascism. This is because given the present balance of class forces, the bourgeoisie can rule and realize its principal objectives within the framework of bourgeois democracy. No revolutionary movement is contending with them for power. The revolutionary movement that does exist is growing in strength and influence but remains in an embryonic stage. From the standpoint of the bourgeoisie the present form of class rule—the "shell game" of bourgeois democracy, as Lenin put it—fits the bill quite nicely, at least for the moment.

At the same time, however, the rise of the New Right is closely related to the danger of fascism. As the class struggle intensifies the danger of the ruling class going over to fascism increases. The New Right, both organizationally and ideologically, prepares the ground for the development of a fascist movement. The struggle against the New Right is part and parcel of the struggle against fascism and must be consciously developed in this way. Fascism grows out of reaction and draws on its legacy. In this sense the struggle against reaction is a struggle to nip the growth of fascism in the bud.

CONFUSION PRODUCES COSTLY MISTAKES

To mistake ordinary (even if extreme) reaction for fascism leads to strategic disorientation. It invariably involves a mistaken estimate of the aims of the enemy, which is bound up with an equally mistaken estimate of the development of the popular forces.

The case of the CPUSA following World War II illustrates some of the most relevant dangers associated with this line. After the war U.S. monopoly consolidated around a program of reaction. The anti-fascist wartime alliance with the Soviet Union gave way to the cold war. The monopolists set out to shackle the labor movement with Taft-Hartley and purge the CIO of left influence. They moved to first isolate and then repress the Communist Party.

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Reaction

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At first, under the sway of Earl Browder's right opportunist line, the CPUSA expected U.S. capitalism to move in a progressive direction. With the fall of Browder this rosy picture gave way to a characterization of the period as one of imminent economic crisis and pending fascism. This estimation led to a series of left errors. In 1948 the Party made support for a third party the condition for united front relations in the CIO, breaking with those forces who did not climb on the Henry Wallace bandwagon. In the absence of strong rank & file support for Wallace and with the bulk of the CIO leadership lining up behind Truman, these tactics isolated the Party, paving the way for the expulsions of the left.

In headier moments the Party argued that the masses were spontaneously breaking with the Democratic Party in spite of the treachery of their leaders and that the Party's tactics would be vindicated on election day. This illusion was laid to rest when Henry Wallace polled barely more than a million votes—less than a tenth of the Party's prediction.

When more sober about Wallace's prospects, the Party argued that the danger of fascism coupled with the danger

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of war made the formation of the Progressive Party imperative, regardless of the consequences. Just how a still-born Progressive Party strengthened the anti-fascist fight was never made clear.

The indictment of Party leaders under the Smith Act seemed to confirm the Party's estimate that fascism was around the corner. Expecting the suspension of all opportunities for legal work, the Party took the bulk of its cadres under ground. The Party retreated from all positions of mass influence and ceased to be a real force in U.S. political life. The Party was liquidated in all but name. Party members led a demoralizing hide-and-seek existence waiting for the fascist takeover that never came.

Right errors in connection with a mistaken estimate of the fascist danger are also possible. Strategic formulations appropriate to a situation in which the fascist danger is an imminent threat can become a rationalization for a generalized right opportunist policy in a period in which these conditions do not exist.

Given the dominance of voluntarism and ultra-'leftism' in our movement, it is errors of a left character which are the main danger.

Look for Part II of "The Growth of Reaction" in the next issue of the Organizer.