

Proletarian Unity League

2, 3, Many Parties of a New Type? Against the Ultra-Left Line

Chapter 5: The Social and Ideological Roots of "Left" Opportunism B. Some Features of the Historical Roots of "Left" Opportunism in the U.S. Communist Movement

The 1950's saw the relative stability of U.S. capitalism. Keynesianism could not and did not succeed in ironing out the capitalist economic cycle. But though the so-called economic "dips" came at an ever quicker pace, the Second Great Depression which the Communist Party had predicted in the late 1940's did not materialize.

Taking advantage of the opportunist legacy handed down to the Communist Party from the Browder period, the U.S. bourgeoisie reinforced its political and ideological hegemony through massive assaults on the militant wings of the labor. Black, and Puerto Rican movements in the late 'forties and early 'fifties. In the first instance, this repression encouraged a "left" deviation within the Communist Party. Along with its fatalistic conceptions of an imminent Depression and the strong possibility of a Third World War, the Party saw a drive to fascism on the part of Wall Street. In response, many upper and middle-level cadre went underground, and the Party dropped thousands of members from its rolls. Now obviously a clandestine apparatus was and is necessary to the work of a Marxist-Leninist Party. But the Party's response amounted to protecting its cadre core at the expense of its ties with the masses, substituting organizational measures for the political defense which the times demanded. Though its error took a "left" form in regard to a correct combination of clandestine and open work, in essence it represented a Right error which capitulated to the anti-Communist attacks of the period and effectively abdicated its leadership responsibilities before the masses. This abdication was most apparent in the South, where the work of reestablishing the Party, particularly among the Black masses, fell apart.

By the mid to late 'fifties, direct assaults on the labor movement had receded, and the bourgeoisie bent its efforts mainly towards the strengthening of the so-called "liberal consensus": a bourgeois consensus on the waging of the "Cold War" against socialism combined with concessions towards revisionism, on the defense of white supremacy at home and colonial and neo-colonial rule abroad, and of course on anti-communism. United States hegemony within the imperialist camp allowed the bourgeoisie to dispense an even greater share of its much increased super-profits to the upper crust of the white workers. Only in the South did the mailed fist of Capital continue to brandish itself more openly. An occasional token reform of its segregationist policies and mild support for the most reformist forces among the Black people could not contain the rising militance of the Black masses. Both extra-legal and legal repression met the early, non-violent civil rights movement, even while the mass scale and increasing militance of the Afro-American movement in the South forced some concessions from the monopoly bourgeoisie. If the quickest way to get killed in the U.S. remained registering Black voters in rural Georgia, Alabama or Mississippi, nonetheless class struggle in the U.S., particularly outside the South, took relatively peaceful forms throughout this period.

The Communist Party's trade-union line had brought a sizeable number of middle and, until the early 'fifties, even upper-level trade union officials around the Party. Building political support for communism among the rank and file had not had the same priority. Weakened by repression and still more by ideological confusion, opportunism and cowardice, the leadership cut thousands of militant working class members adrift, particularly revolutionary Black and Puerto Rican cadre, calling into question its roots in the basic proletarian masses.

All these factors favored the growth of modern revisionism in the CPUSA. When the predictions of economic collapse proved false. Party economists began to buy the Keynesian message that capitalism could even out the boom and bust cycle through "science," and indefinitely postpone any serious crisis. A letter version of Keynesianism came forward to replace Marx in the Party's economic theory, and with it came reformist conclusions about capitalism. When the bourgeoisie failed to turn to fascism or even ban the CPUSA, and instead retained its bourgeois democratic form of rule, the Party leadership dropped the "left" guise for its liquidationism and took an openly capitulationist stance. Small matter that many features of bourgeois democracy did not extend to the Black people, the Puerto Rican people, the Chicano people, Asian-Americans or Native Americans. Under the guise of re-entering the "mainstream" of U.S. labor and the Black people's movement, the Party liquidated the Left centers in mass work, including the Negro Labor Councils. And with a base outside the South, the Party tended to adopt the perspectives of the white labor aristocracy on the nature of the era, and saw only peaceful struggle ahead for the working class.

By the mid-fifties, the vanguard Party of the proletariat was no more, and in its place stood a reformist echo of the labor bureaucracy and Democratic Party liberalism. For the Party leadership, the capitalism of severe crises, pitched class battles and the National Guard had gone the way of the steam engine, even while bombs went off in Birmingham. While the Democratic Party prepared for the War on Poverty and the Great Society, modern revisionism advanced a program of "radical reforms" for an anti-monopoly coalition, and declared the NAACP the basic leadership of the Afro-American people.

By the mid-sixties, a changing domestic and international situation had starkly outlined the evolutionist and reformist perspectives of the CPUSA to the leading sections of the mass movement. Under the blows of the indomitable Vietnamese people, the liberal consensus shredded at its tweedy seams. Faced with an intransigent defense of the "color line," a revolutionary nationalist tendency gained strength within the Black people's movement. In the streets of Harlem and then in Watts, the Afro-American masses echoed the revolutionary nationalists' rejection of non-violence as an ideology. Inspired by SNCC and the Black movement, the organized anti-war and white student movements took on a mass and increasingly anti-imperialist character. By the early 1970's, with the rise of Soviet social-imperialism, the imperialist camp had broken up, and U.S. hegemony with it. Their war-ravaged economies rebuilt and their international military adventures at a minimum, Japan and the Federal Republic of Germany stepped up their competition with the U.S. The extraordinary super-profits that were supposed to flow home throughout the "American Century" came harder. While the bourgeoisie continued to rely mainly on selective reforms, the late 'sixties brought Nixon's "Southern Strategy" which called for increased repression, particularly directed against the movements of the oppressed nationalities and their organizations (the Black Panther Party, especially). Finally, the

devaluation of the dollar in 1971 signaled that an era of U.S. capitalist stability had ended.

The Rise of Ultra-Leftism

But the very features of the period which demonstrated the bankruptcy of the CPUSA also encouraged the growth of ultra-leftism within the organized anti-war, national and women's movements. In reaction to the abject reformism of modern revisionism, the emergence of an ultra-left current was inevitable (see end of Chapter Two, section J.). But that reaction only gained breadth and depth with the advent of favorable circumstances. Internationally, the period of parliamentary "struggle" as conducted by the modern revisionist parties appeared at an end. The May '68 events in France, Italy's "hot summer" of 1969, the re-emergence of the Quebecois and Irish national liberation struggles, and the Japanese student movement shook prevailing assumptions about "advanced capitalist societies" and to many participants heralded the rise of powerful revolutionary movements within the Western imperialist countries. In Latin America, the anti-imperialist forces still had the initiative in the late 'sixties.

At home, the murderous repression exercised against revolutionary Black organizations and increased repression of the anti-war movement led many U.S. activists to conclude that the time of mainly illegal struggle approached. The instability of U.S. capitalism, hidden to many of the children of the 'fifties, now loomed larger than life. Adventurism and the intoxication of the revolutionary phrase gripped a significant section of the revolutionary forces. The Cleaver wing of the BPP, led by an open admirer of Bakunin, the Weather Underground, Venceremos and other groups put their organizations where their intoxication was, and sprung forth as the extreme expression of the ultra-left mood of late 1968-1971. And just as the reformism encouraged by the 'fifties could not exploit the new possibilities of the 'sixties, so the leftism of the late 'sixties could not adapt to the decline of the spontaneous mass movements in evidence by the middle seventies.

Though it drew very different conclusions about the tasks of revolutionaries, the re-emerging Marxist-Leninist movement could not remain immune to either the objective forces which nourished anarchism or to anarchist influence itself. To understand the material reasons for this, we need to look at what the anarchist and Marxist-Leninist organizations held in common: a particular social stratum.