

How Maoists failed test of miners' strike

RCP's sectarian policy

By David Frankel

In the midst of the recent coal strike, club-swinging thugs led by the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), a Maoist organization, tried to break up a meeting in Houston in support of the miners. Several union activists, including socialists, were seriously injured by the attackers.

The attack in Houston, which occurred on March 17, was not an isolated incident. At a strike support rally in Los Angeles February 22, RCP members provoked a brief physical confrontation with stewards of United Auto Workers Local 216, which was hosting the meeting.

Earlier that week, the RCP disrupted a plant-gate collection organized for the striking mine workers by Local 216. RCP members shouted, "Don't give to the Miller bureaucrats," referring to United Mine Workers President Arnold Miller.

What has led the RCP to engage in such actions?

There is a strong element of desperation in the RCP's resort to violence. To begin with, the group has just undergone a split in which it lost roughly half of its forces. RCP leader Bob Avakian won't regain any of his lost members by launching

the union, the only place for genuine militants.

Formations similar to the MRSC have been set up by the RCP in other unions. These all function as sections of the RCP's National United Workers Organization (NUWO). The RCP's entire strategy is based on trying to build NUWO—rather than the unions—as the mass organizations of the working class.

One has only to look at the publications of the NUWO and its sections to see this. *Rank & File Unity*, for example, is the newspaper of the Miners Right to Strike Committee. On its back page, *Rank & File Unity* regularly publishes a list headlined, "What You Can Do." Among the suggestions are circulation of MRSC petitions, formation of MRSC chapters, distribution of MRSC literature, fund raising for the MRSC, and so on.

Nowhere do the Maoists suggest that the UMWA itself should put out literature explaining the miners' demands, organize fund raising, solidarity meetings, or publicity. In fact, the RCP had no proposals whatsoever for how the UMWA and other unions could fight the coal operators and block their attack on the miners. The main activity of the

collections would have helped bring discussion of the miners' strike before the union movement as a whole.

Sabotage

Not only did the RCP/NUWO/MRSC fail to help organize effective support for the miners, but they actually *opposed* the broad labor-sponsored events that took place.

In Los Angeles, when UAW Local 216 voted to carry out a plant-gate collection for the UMWA and the Stearns, Kentucky, strikers, the MRSC carried out a counter-collection in its own name. Despite the Maoist disruption, auto workers contributed more than \$1,700 for the miners' strike during one shift change. Such union-endorsed actions raised about \$30,000 in the Los Angeles area during the course of the strike and another \$65,000 in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Thousands of workers across the country attended strike support meetings and rallies, joined car caravans to take food and clothing to the strikers, and sent donations and resolutions of support. All of these actions were initiated by rank-and-file unionists (including socialists) or local union officers. Toward the end of the strike these local actions prompted donations totaling more than \$4 million from several international unions.

But the RCP would have nothing to do with the union-backed solidarity events, giving the excuse that "bureaucrats" were involved. The Maoists went so far as to attempt to picket a rally of 400 in Los Angeles February 22 and to physically assault the Houston gathering.

The grotesqueness of this dead-end factionalism was highlighted at a strike-support meeting organized by students at the University of West Virginia in Morgantown February 3. Speakers at this rally of 250 included Roy Keith, a Stearns miner who was injured in a police attack on a picket line, and several local union leaders.

The officials who spoke at this meeting were trade unionists working regular jobs. The president of the Monongalia-Preston Labor Council, who signed a statement of support for the miners, works as a meat cutter in the A & P.

But when supporters of the MRSC in the Morgantown area were asked to back the rally and help build it, they refused. They explained that they would only relate to "the rank and file," and that the rally would have "bureaucrats" up on the platform.

Despite the super revolutionary posturing of the RCP, their sectarian opposition to any effort to mobilize the power of the unions behind the coal strike amounted in practice to sabotage of the miners' cause.

Union bureaucracy

Not only socialists but tens of thousands of other union activists see the need for a new, fighting leadership in the unions. Millions more workers are painfully aware that the present union officialdom is doing a poor job of defending their interests, without yet seeing any alternative.

The problem is how to build a mass movement within the unions that can win the necessary changes. What answer does the RCP give to the problems of program and leadership in the unions? Only this—to brand the union officialdom as an enemy on exactly the same level as the bosses.

Thus, an MRSC leaflet handed out February 6 at a strike support demonstration in Pittsburgh declared: "... the coal owners have shown how desperate they are to crush us and have a work force that does not stand in the way of their profits. Our international has stood right with the operators in doing this."

The leaflet concluded: "The lines are drawn. On one side stand the operators with their partners in our own international and government. On our side stands the rank and file and the growing support of workers across the country."

It is true that the high-paid bureaucrats who have usurped control over the unions follow a program dictated by the bosses. (It is not true that the United Mine Workers is identical to other unions in this respect, a point we will discuss later.)

The union bureaucrats accept the need for "fair" profits and "restraint" on workers' demands for higher wages, job security, and better conditions.



Militant/Nancy Cole

February 3 coal strike support meeting of 250 people in Morgantown, W. Va. RCP refused to help build broad solidarity actions such as this one.

attacks on labor solidarity meetings. But such actions may help him to silence—at least for a while—questions and frustrations among his remaining followers about the increasing isolation of the RCP.

RCP members, operating through a group known as the Miners Right to Strike Committee (MRSC), gained some following in the coalfields during the wildcat strikes in 1975 and 1976. But the RCP and its MRSC were isolated and discredited during the recent national strike.

Miners found that the RCP was unable to answer the big questions facing the UMWA and the labor movement as a whole: How to defend gains they had won in the past? How to strengthen the union for future battles? How to develop a leadership that will stand up to the antiunion assault?

Failing to win support for its ideas by argument and discussion, the RCP has turned to thuggery.

Unfortunately, RCP members have been widely identified (in part by red-baiting from the companies and the news media) as the "radicals" in the UMWA. This gives a completely false picture of what socialists stand for and serves to discredit socialist ideas among miners and other workers.

So it is important to clarify what's wrong with the RCP's policies and how their destructive actions have nothing in common with a socialist or revolutionary strategy.

Sectarian policy

At the core of the RCP's trade-union strategy is the attempt to substitute phoney "rank and file" groups run by the RCP for the union itself. These tiny caucuses devote their energy to shrill denunciations of the present union officials—without explaining the new policies needed if the unions are to defend the workers' rights and living standards.

The RCP has only a handful of members in the UMWA. But in setting up their MRSC, they insisted that this was the "real" rank-and-file movement in

MRSC during the strike was to organize demonstrations against the UMWA leadership under the empty slogan, "No sellout."

Two strategies in action

The Socialist Workers Party and Young Socialist Alliance followed a completely different policy during the miners' strike.

The SWP and YSA began from the standpoint of what was needed to win the strike. Socialists focused their efforts on exposing the propaganda of the bosses, explaining the real issues in the strike, and helping to build large, visible actions of solidarity with the miners. To be effective, such support activities had to draw into action the broadest possible forces—especially the forces of the organized labor movement.

The sectarians in the RCP viewed solidarity actions that were not carried out under their control as a threat. They acted as if little RCP-led groups could substitute for the power of the organized union movement.

An MRSC leaflet handed out in Pittsburgh gives an indication of the Maoists' absurd pretense that they were solely responsible for solidarity with the miners. According to the leaflet:

"The NATIONAL UNITED WORKERS ORGANIZATION (NUWO) and its mine section MINERS RIGHT TO STRIKE COMMITTEE (MRTSC) are building support for the strike throughout the country. The NUWO auto section has collected over \$500 at plant gate collections in Detroit, and here in Pittsburgh the NUWO steel section collected a similar amount at the steel mills."

What the leaflet didn't say was that NUWO activists carrying out such collections made no effort to get the support of the union locals where the collections were taken. Plant-gate collections taken by union stewards would have raised much more money for the strikers. And motions for such

They stifle union democracy. They tie the unions to the political parties of the bosses—the Democrats and Republicans. They accept and even help to enforce discrimination by the employers against women, Blacks, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans. They blame unemployment on other workers—undocumented immigrants, or workers in other countries who produce goods imported here—rather than on the profit-greedy policies of the bosses.

But to come up with a strategy for transforming the unions into effective, fighting organizations that defend the workers' interests, it is necessary to know more than just how bad the bureaucrats are. Revolutionaries also have to take into account some other factors:

First, the only force that can transform the unions is the mass of workers themselves. No small group, no matter how correct its ideas, can substitute itself for the mobilization of the union ranks.

Second, the union bureaucrats face a contradiction. On the one hand, their subservience to procapitalist policies makes them less and less capable of defending the workers' jobs, wages, and working conditions. On the other hand, they cannot survive for long without at least *appearing* to be representing the members and winning occasional concessions from the employers.

What is needed is to help the workers, through their own experiences of struggle, draw the correct conclusions about what new policies are needed in the unions. Only through this process can a new, class-struggle leadership be forged.

A revolutionary strategy requires, above all, a program of action that corresponds to the real needs of the workers. It also requires some tactical sense and ability to exploit the contradictory position of the union misleaders so that broader and broader

its pages to letters and discussion from working miners. For the first time ever, the union ranks won the right to vote on their contract.

Without these democratic gains—which strengthened the union and inspired the ranks—it's a safe bet that miners would not have been able to carry out their 110-day strike this year. In the course of the strike, new leaders *did* begin to step forward.

These militants did not stand on the sidelines and shout "No sellout." Rather, they organized mass meetings of miners where the ranks had the opportunity to speak at open microphones. They solicited support from other unions. And in rejecting the contract proposals accepted by Miller, they pointed to the demands democratically voted on by the 1976 UMWA convention.

The mass strike meetings and the emergence of some fighting leaders on the local level were among the most important developments in the strike. Yet the RCP sectarians had *nothing to say* about them—because they didn't fit into their schema and were not under their control.

'Convincing' with clubs?

The attack on the Houston strike support meeting starkly exposed the RCP's real attitude toward union democracy.

The RCP tried to justify its violence with the lie that the meeting was organized to back the inadequate contract proposal voted down by miners over the weekend of March 5. An RCP leaflet handed out after the assault declared, "Confrontation Exposes Supporters of Miller's Latest Sellout."

However, the real purpose of the meeting was explained in the program passed out by the organizers of the rally. It said, "We planned tonight's meeting to give people in the Houston area an opportunity to hear a first-hand report from the

newspaper, contains the following passage:

"... the capitalists are trying to use diversions to confuse the issues and turn miners away from building militant rank and file struggle against the companies. This is what they are trying to do by their complaints and grumbling about UMWA president Arnold Miller and his ineffectual leadership. They are surely displeased with Miller's inability to whip the miners into line. But at least as much they would like to see miners focus their anger and militancy away from the companies into an anti-Miller campaign."

The RCP goes on to denounce the "Dump Miller" campaign as "a diversion" cooked up by "opportunistic union hacks." "Objectively," it adds, "these guys are serving the interests of the coal owners and the capitalists by confusing the issues."

Never mentioned is the fact that during the strike the foremost advocate of the "Dump Miller" stance was the Miners Right to Strike Committee!

Strike lessons

Socialists believe that the miners set a powerful example for all working people. By understanding and extending the strengths of the miners' strike, workers can take some big steps forward in defending themselves from today's antilabor attacks.

That means, in the first place, extending the fight for union democracy—the right of the members to vote on contracts, elect union officers, and democratically decide all aspects of union policy.

Second, the ability of the miners to turn back the attack on their union showed the crucial importance of working-class solidarity. This concept has a broader meaning than simply that of unions supporting each other's struggles. It is by labor supporting the struggles of Blacks, Chicanos, women, working farmers, and other oppressed layers of



Militant/Nancy Cole

New leaders stepped forward during miners' strike. They organized mass meetings, such as one above in Pennsylvania, where union members were able to democratically discuss issues facing UMWA.

layers of workers see the need for a change. These are all qualities completely absent in sectarians such as the RCP.

In the coal strike, for example, they were blind to the fact that behind the endorsement some union officials gave to solidarity actions lay the pressure of the rank and file. By refusing to call on the official union leadership to throw its weight behind a struggle the sectarians both sabotage the immediate struggle and *let the union misleaders off the hook*.

Union militants need to put forward effective proposals for strengthening the union and demand that union leaders *lead*—that they fight for the demands of the workers. This is the way that officials who are unwilling to act in the interests of the ranks will be discredited and replaced.

Union democracy

Key to the process of developing new policies and a new leadership is the fight for union democracy—the right of the ranks to discuss, decide, and implement policies in their own interests.

But the sectarians of the RCP ignore—and even oppose—the fight for union democracy. This is evident from their contemptuous disregard for the gains miners won by ousting the corrupt regime of former UMWA President Tony Boyle and electing the Miners for Democracy slate in 1972.

Under Boyle's rule, dissident miners would find that their medical cards had been taken away. Retired miners who failed to toe the Boyle line would have their pension checks stopped. Those who went too far in opposing Boyle, like Jock Yablonski, who ran against him in 1969, were murdered.

With the victory of the Miners for Democracy, important changes took place in the UMWA. District elections were held, including in eight UMWA districts that had been under trusteeship since the days of John L. Lewis. The *UMW Journal* opened

UMWA, and to raise funds to help support striking miners and pensioners." Not one speaker voiced support for the proposed contract.

But suppose the RCP had not lied about the character of the meeting. Suppose backers of the contract really had organized a rally. Would a physical attack on such a meeting be justified?

The answer is *no*.

Any such attack would be an assault on the right of all miners to discuss and decide on their contract. Thousands of miners—one third of those voting—cast their ballots in favor of the second contract proposal.

They had their own reasons. Many were feeling the pinch after more than two months without a paycheck. Others may have felt that the union was not in a position to do any better.

Would the RCP advocate beating up these miners if it had the power to do so? That is the logic of its position.

The final contract offer approved by the miners had many negative features, although it was better than the earlier offers. Does that mean that the majority of miners who voted for it approved of "Miller's Latest Sellout"? Should they be attacked with clubs?

By their use of violence to try to settle differences in the working-class movement, the RCP is resorting to the same methods used by the old Boyle bureaucracy in the UMWA. The RCP thus offers a preview of how it would operate if by some unfortunate chance it ever obtained positions of leadership in the union.

Sectarian logic

The sectarian logic of focusing its attack on the union leadership rather than the bosses finally became so clear that the RCP was forced to pull back and denounce the consequences of its own practice.

The March 1978 issue of *Revolution*, the RCP's

society that attempts to play off one section of the workers against others can be defeated.

Finally, it is necessary for the labor movement to act independently of the employers and their government instead of seeking to collaborate with them.

Here too, the miners set an example. They refused to trust the employers, and they communicated that well-justified mistrust to the whole country. The miners knew that if safety was left to the bosses' discretion, their average life expectancy would plummet.

When the Carter administration stepped in and tried to break the strike with a Taft-Hartley injunction, the ranks of the UMWA gave workers everywhere another valuable lesson in independent labor action.

What is necessary is that the independence of the ranks of the UMWA on the picket line be generalized in the political sphere. The UMWA—and the labor movement as a whole—need to break with the Democratic and Republican parties. Labor needs its own political party if it is to effectively defend its interests.

Poverty of ideas

These are lessons that are of vital importance to every working person in the United States.

Yet during the entire 110 days of the coal strike, the RCP/MRSC never raised the idea of independent labor political action. Not once.

They said nothing about the need for union democracy.

On the issue of working-class solidarity, the RCP was not short on rhetoric. But in practice it opposed building a broad strike support movement.

Now, with this miserable performance behind them, the Maoists are trying to overcome their poverty of ideas by physical attacks on those who disagree with them.