

Workshop #1

The Class Nature of the Soviet Union and Its Role in the World Today

The question of the class nature and international role of the Soviet Union has occupied a central place in the political debates of the anti-revisionist, anti-"left" opportunist trend since the trend's birth. This is no accident, for it is undoubtedly true that no stable Marxist-Leninist trend - indeed, no stable anti-imperialist movement - can be built without correctly resolving this crucial theoretical and political question.

Over the past six years, the trend's discussion of the class nature and role of the Soviet Union has yielded substantial gains. Virtually without exception, the trend has rejected the Maoist thesis that the Soviet Union has restored capitalism and is a social-imperialist enemy of the peoples of the world. However, despite this important step forward, there is not yet full agreement concerning what type of social formation the Soviet Union actually is and what role it plays in world affairs. Line of March has argued that the Soviet Union is a socialist country and an integral part of the world front against U.S. imperialism, and has stressed that only this perspective marks a thoroughgoing break with Maoism. Others in the trend grudgingly admit the socialist character of the USSR, but assert that it remains a "hegemonistic superpower" which functions as a danger to the peoples of the world. Still others adhere to various theoretical arguments that deny the socialist character of the Soviet Union, the most common of which is Paul Sweezy's thesis that the Soviet Union is some new type of society neither capitalist nor socialist. Not surprisingly, activists holding these latter views also vacillate (at best) on considering the Soviet Union a progressive force in world affairs and an integral part of the international anti-imperialist front.

Clearly, taking up serious struggle over the question of the Soviet Union, the purpose of this workshop, is key to the trend's further maturation as a Marxist-Leninist force.

Readings: "Capitalism in the USSR? An Opportunist Theory in Disarray" in Line of March #3 and #4; "Symposium on Paul Sweezy's Theory of Post-Revolutionary Society" in Line of March #10; "The International Communist Movement: A Reappraisal", introduction and section on Maoism, pp. 39-58, Line of March #9

Recommended readings: Post-Revolutionary Society, by Paul Sweezy; The Myth of Capitalism Reborn, particularly pp. 6-18, by Michael Goldfield and Melvin Rothenberg; "Is the USSR Socialist?", exchange in Line of March #8 between Goldfield/Rothenberg and two editors of Line of March.

Discussion Questions:

1) The most influential theoretical proposition in the trend denying the socialist character of the Soviet Union is the thesis of post-revolutionary society advanced by the noted U.S. Marxist Paul Sweezy. (A less influential proposition is the transition thesis of Michael Goldfield and Melvin Rothenberg). Sweezy argues that the USSR cannot be considered capitalist because the fundamental laws of motion of capitalism do not operate there, but that it is also not socialist because the Soviet working class allegedly has little or no input into the decisions affecting political and economic life in the USSR and is supposedly exploited and oppressed by a new ruling class.

Sweezy's view is challenged on both theoretical and empirical grounds by the three essays on his work contained in the Line of March symposium. The main theoretical argument, made by Jonathan Aurthur and Tom Angotti/John Zilber, is that Sweezy's position avoid examining the objective laws of motion of the

Soviet Union's mode of production - indeed, that it denies the existence of such laws and abandons the Marxist conception that a society's essential nature is determined above all by the method through which its members organize the production and reproduction of their everyday life. The main empirical argument, made principally by Albert Szymanski, is that Sweezy has accepted a host of anti-communist, anti-Soviet myths and is downright wrong in his estimation of the role the Soviet working class plays in Soviet political life. In summation, Aurthur, Angotti/Zilber, and Szymanski all assert, against Sweezy, that the Soviet Union is a socialist country in which the ruling class is the Soviet proletariat.

Draw out the main arguments Sweezy makes for his thesis and the main criticisms advanced by Aurthur, Angotti/Zilber, and Szymanski. State which you agree with and why. If there are other views in the workshop challenging the position that the USSR is socialist, they should be drawn out and discussed here as well.

2) Clearly, the debate over the class character of the USSR has immense political significance. Basing itself on the proposition that the Soviet Union is a socialist country, as well as a concrete analysis of the role of the Soviet Union in world politics, Line of March has argued that the Soviet Union constitutes an integral and at times decisive part of the world anti-imperialist front. Line of March has argued as well that it is precisely the sharp antagonism between the socialist USSR and U.S. imperialism that provides the material basis for the rectification of the many backward lines which have dominated the CPSU for over 25 years. Finally, Line of March has asserted - and we believe demonstrated - that this position is the inevitable corollary to a thorough break with the Maoist capitalist restoration thesis and its accompanying anti-Soviet prejudices.

There is not, however, firm unity on this perspective throughout the trend. In the face of overwhelming theoretical and empirical evidence, most forces in the trend have been won to acknowledge the socialist character of the Soviet Union. However, the grip of anti-Soviet prejudice remains so strong that, even without rigorous theoretical support, many forces in the trend cling to the view that in some way the Soviet Union constitutes a danger to the peoples of the world. This position, most commonly associated with the Guardian newspaper, asserts that the Soviet Union, while socialist, remains a hegemonistic superpower which struggles to dominate other peoples and nations. In the view of Line of March, this position constitutes a centrist error, and leads directly to vacillation in confronting U.S. imperialism on such key battlegrounds of the world revolution as Southeast Asia, Afghanistan, and Poland.

What are the main theoretical and empirical arguments for the position that the Soviet Union constitutes an integral part of the world anti-imperialist front? What are the similar arguments for the view that the Soviet Union, while socialist, is a hegemonistic superpower? What is the significance of each view for analyzing events in such areas as Southeast Asia, Afghanistan, and Poland? Which view do you think most accurately describes reality? To what extent can our trend consolidate its break with "left" opportunism short of the formulation that the Soviet Union is socialist and an integral part of the world anti-imperialist front?

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