

[Mass Strike, TU Perspectives and the SL]

Over the past few months, an internal crisis has gripped the Mass Strike Organizing Committee (MSOC). This crisis was brought about by pressure to cease independent existence and enter the Spartacist League. There might be the feeling on the part of some comrades that we, as the advocates of such a move, have 'scuttled' Mass Strike; or that we have reacted out of 'panic'; or that we are not considering certain theoretical questions fully enough.

On the contrary, it is our feeling that, in the first place, destroying the organizational existence of the MSOC is not 'scuttling' our comrades, but opening the path to more and better communist activity, to true Bolshevik activity as part of the revolutionary vanguard. In the second place, we have not reacted out of 'panic' of any sort: we have been among the most dedicated Mass Strike comrades, and did not suddenly 'lose faith'. Rather, we had read SL literature and talked with SL members for months before this struggle arose. Not panic, but a sincere desire to recognize and correct our errors has motivated us.

Corollary to the 'panic' characterization has been in at least one comrade's mind the notion that by orienting toward Spartacist we have been 'consumerist'. This is simply sectarianism, for we so oriented because it is our well-considered belief that the SL is the Bolshevik formation; further, it is a slander, for it implies that we are not capable of the political consideration giving rise to such a decision: but we are, and we have.

As to the depth of MSOC's consideration of the theoretical questions posed by this struggle, there are two points to be made. First of all, the resolution of the present conflict will not be the end of political education for any of us, so that arguing to raise us all to the peaks of Marxist-Leninist scholarship are but stalling tactics. As we attempt to show in this paper, the lines are clear enough. The other aspect of the theoretical questions is that not all of Marxist theory is applicable. For example, attempts to orient to the SL on the basis of its position on the peasantry are out-and-out nonsense, for this is neither the most pressing nor the most rigid of the SL's positions.

With these considerations, we have found it necessary to formulate our perspectives on two important questions: the trade union program and the issue of revolutionary regroupment. They have been subjected to criticism by our Spartacist comrades, and we now submit them as the basis for bringing Mass Strike's cadre to the SL.

In comradely struggle,

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Trade union activity is vital in order to capture the loyalty of the working class:

(1) The class, particularly in the developed capitalist nations, develops sophisticated organs for economic self-defense. The communist cannot win the confidence of the class unless he shows an ability to lead its day-to-day struggles. .

(2) Trade unions are an expression of the social and technical organization of the class. To the extent that trade union activity arises spontaneously, so the bourgeois order inevitably contributes to the strengthening of proletarian discipline.

(3) It must always be kept in mind that the struggle for leadership of the class does not take place in a vacuum. The communists assume this leadership not only by virtue of their militance in the class struggle, but by consciously counterposing themselves to the traditional leadership of the class--the social democrats, stalinists, revisionists. The influence of alien ideology (this false leadership) cannot be combatted by circumventing it. Indeed, the very concept of a transitional program implies that the communists must be loyal to institutions that they do not control such as the trade unions, in opposition to the bourgeois class and its state, and must struggle to win positions of leadership within them. Only in this manner can the communists consolidate real influence, and increase the ease with which it can conduct agitation within the working class.

(4) The communist always adopts a military perspective to the class struggle, attacking the enemy where it is the most vulnerable, and seeking to gain influence where it counts most. As such, the unionized sections of the working class, which are the most disciplined and are found in the most concentrated areas of industry, are a logical point of entry. However, a successful revolution depends upon the active participation, indeed the leadership, of the more oppressed layers of the proletariat, who often are not unionized. Instruments of dual power, the factory committee and the soviets, will be mobilized in a time of crisis of the bourgeois order, as the organization of the whole class. Thus The Death Agony of Capitalism (1938) --"The prime significance of the [factory] committee, however, lies in the fact that it becomes the militant staff for such working class layers as the trade union is usually incapable of moving to action." (pp. 15-16)

(5) The trade union program is never a comprehensive program for the class as a whole. In addition, because of the pressure of day-to-day struggles, trade union cadre are particularly prone to opportunist deviations. Hence it is important that trade union activity be closely supervised by the communist party. The aim is never merely to disseminate anti-capitalist propoganda among the masses, but to build trade union fractions that carry out the policies of that party in particular.

These points provide just a general summary of trade union perspectives, emphasizing the close relation of the party to the building of trade union caucuses. As opposed to this conception of constructing caucuses led by party members around a transitional program, the notion of an RWM is raised. Perhaps 'opposed' is the wrong term, because the RWM strategy is extremely ambiguous about the role

of the party. At any rate, the RWM concept seems to be a network of rank and file shop floor movements based on a 'transitional program'. Of course, it is useless to talk about a transitional program without a party. The transitional program is simply a method of taking the class from one point to another. It is initiated by an organization external to the trade unions--the party, and is advanced for the sake of winning for that party the leadership of the class. Without a party, a shop movement based on a transitional program becomes just a reformist movement. If we grant that RWM does recognize the need for a directing party, then its weakness results from its incorrect conception of the relationship of party to class. This point (revolutionary regroupment) is dealt with handily elsewhere in the paper. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that the RWM concept does have a certain validity--at a certain stage. It is a fairly accurate description of the type of organization that would be necessary in a revolutionary crisis, with the RWM's being a kind of dual power. As a general model, however, the RWM is just utopianism. It rests on the same sort of illusions as syndicalism--that the working class can organize itself spontaneously (or, for that matter, around a 'transitional program') in order to take power, or, put in another way, that merely publicity of trade union struggles from both the outside a la Mass Strike, or from the inside, can build a disciplined proletarian movement.

After considerable thought, I was able to find an analogy to the RWM conception. It is an outer shell of communism with an undigested inner core of syndicalism. It is roughly the situation that prevailed in the first few years of the French Communist Party. Though both a proletarian party and a trade union section were countenanced, the activities of the two were kept strictly separated. The party's role was justified only in the 'political' sphere, as opposed to the economic--this implied that it was essentially to be kept under wraps until the struggle for state power, which is the way the RWM was presented. The day-to-day struggles would be conducted by the trade union segments, or the RWM's. The party would remain the source of orthodoxy. This is fairly consistent with a sectarian (or ultra-left) view of the communist party, as the author of the RWM holds. The party exists merely to counterpose itself to bourgeois ideology. It would reject all maneuvers with social democratic forces, such as the united front or a labor party based on the trade unions. Unfortunately, this merely begs the question. The first task facing the party is always to clear out the false leadership of the class. The Bolsheviks faced Menshevik control of the Soviets--the German Communists after WWI faced the USDP and SPD both; the SWP faced the Stalinist Communist parties in the '30's. For this task, tactical maneuvers subordinated to a principled strategic line are necessary. If the party does not undertake these, its cadre in the trade unions will be subjected to prolonged political isolation. The accumulation of these pressures generally induces the party to take a sharp opportunist turn, as with the Stalinists in 1935 or the anarcho-syndicalists in the Civil War in Spain. The point is that ultra-leftism always prepares the way for its 'opposite'--right opportunism. As the syndicalists have always discovered belatedly, these political problems must ultimately be confronted. Relying on shop movements, rather than on a hardened communist party, is no solution.

This, of course, is the source of other ambiguities in the RWM conception. One particularly important one is the relationship to the trade unions and their leadership. The RWM sees itself as a prototype of dual power. Although this is an accurate description of the role of trade union fractions at a certain time--at the crisis of the bourgeois order--this is not generally true. In general, the trade union caucus does not act as a substitute for the union leadership. This, of course, is not an absolute point. When left caucuses can count on support from the rank and file, or in certain extraordinary situations, it can act as the leadership. As The Death Agony of Capitalism puts it--"...and if necessary, not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the trade unions." This of course is a tactical decision for the caucus, and if it is feasible, there is no reason to oppose such actions--just as there was no reason to oppose the construction of mass industrial unions (CIO) outside the existing trade union formation. However, there is always a danger of isolating the militants and radicals by adventurist policies, and care must be taken to avoid this. A related question is the struggle for leadership in the unions. The argument is advanced that the trade union bureaucracy is much too closely linked to the state. Short of capturing state power, the trade unions cannot be won over. Certainly it is true that the bourgeois state has found it necessary to take on many tasks--essentially in order to guarantee monopoly capital's profits and seems to penetrate the institutions of the working class. But the state has traditionally controlled at least some of the critical factors in a revolutionary situation--the armed forces--this does not prevent the growth of revolutionary influence. At bottom, the argument is both defeatist and sectarian. It is defeatist because it reinforces the bitterness of a demoralized working class--"you can't fight city hall"--and it is no different from an argument the bourgeoisie would advance. And it is sectarian because it does not see politics as a struggle for influence in particular arenas. The communist, because he seeks the most efficient path to power, utilizes all the institutions of the working class, even those controlled by the bourgeoisie, as the way to consolidate influence.

Although the word 'regroupment' did not enter MSOC jargon until the current struggle over orienting to Spartacist, we have always had an implicit regroupment perspective. Else, why discuss a possible MSOC trip around the country to spread the RWM program? However, there are key errors separating this implied MSOC perspective from what we (and SL) consider to be the correct regroupment strategy.

The MSOC conception had two sides to it. On the one hand, there was the notion that we had as our responsibility--which we do--to lead the working class; for Mass Strikers this meant jumping headlong into 'mass work' ... and develop a program later. All of us now see the inadequacies of this approach. Yet to be quite clear, there is needed not simply a fully-developed trade union program, but a full revolutionary program: the SL program, to pose the question fully. Mass work of any sort cannot be effectively carried out unless the ranks of the revolutionary cadre are themselves in order, aware of the priorities, national and international, for the communist movement, aware of their heritage, their strategic tasks and tactical

possibilities. Without this, which is to say, without a party, 'mass work' can only mean jumping willy-nilly into the factories for the sole sake of, in fact, jumping willy-nilly into the factories, without a centralized and coherent set of priorities and unified action nation (and world) wide. This, obviously, is not the supplying of leadership to the proletariat.

Regardless of the subjective impulses of certain cadre, this sort of approach, when successful, could only breed syndicalist illusions among the masses. Though the intentions of the initiators might be to use this approach to build a party, their following would have no organic link to any arena of struggle outside the workplace, and even there not be part of a nationally--or internationally--coordinated strategy. And being, after all, determines consciousness. Thus the 'workerism' of the MSOC is ultimately a syndicalist deviation.

The other side of the Mass Strike conception of regroupment is equally erroneous. By naming the MSOC as leadership of the class, as the group attempting to fill the gap in revolutionary proletarian leadership, we have been cynical: we are not that leadership, either in the minds of the workers or in the capacity of our (all-but-non-existent) program. To say that the MSOC is such a leadership is a cynical miseducation of our cadre and a misleadership of the masses, since the task is to construct such a leadership, the revolutionary party. This the SL understands, and to this we are dedicated. To name whatever formation exists as the class leadership is sectarianism a la PL. This, then, is the other error of MSOC: syndicalism on the one hand, sectarianism on the other. The latter deviation has not been fully developed, because of shortcomings both numerical and educational, but remains as a grave possibility.

Dark and distant tales, nicely denounced but without real relevance? Hardly. Although the MSOC has on occasion spoken informally of such regroupment tactics as the trip around the country, there has never been a serious discussion of regroupment strategy. Therefore, one cannot cite MSOC documents on the subject; rather, we have only the semi-official doctrine of frequently-repeated catch phrases to inspect. But these provide us concrete illustrations of both kinds of errors.

For example, all our utopian talk of 'bringing together' the scattered and dispersed remains of the New Left are folly. Together --around what? Trade union perspectives? And in what? At best, only a NAC-style federation of local 'collectives' could result. Even this, however, is doubtful. The New Left has passed into history. The corpse stinks--let's bury it have done, not try to resurrect the damn thing. To pose such utopianism as an alternative to entering the SL, whose politics are by all accounts the best we've seen, is dead-end sectarianism and incredible (if not unusual) cynicism.

Another example is our perennial discussion of the newspaper. On the matter of press policy, recall Lenin's What Is To Be Done?, in which he argues the need not for local papers, but for a nation-wide mass revolutionary organ distributed in all localities. For this, as for everything else, we must have a party. Furthermore,

plots to fire the imagination of the masses through a good local newspaper, an improved Mass Strike, are not alternatives to entering the Bolshevik formation. Regardless of the importance of any segment of mass work, or of the combined importance of all segments, mass work is subordinate to the party. This alone guarantees that the vanguard shall be able to effectively lead the class. Placing mass work above the party (as did one MSOC'er in attempting to pose certain conditions for press policy as terms of his entry into SL) is simply that same old 'pro-party' (ha!) Mass Strike syndicalism.

The correct approach to regroupment overcomes both these possible deviations. In our opinion, the construction of the revolutionary party to lead the proletariat is the primary task. Therefore, emphasis must fall on actual party building; the development of a full transitional program, the training of cadre in democratic centralism, and the tempering of comrades for orderly trade union work around a coherent set of priorities.

For this the MSOC has proven itself incapable. Even were the Mass Strike to right its past wrongs, it would be but a localized, isolated, mini-Spartacist. Independent existence would then only serve to throw up organizational barriers preventing entry on the basis of political agreement, into Spartacist. This we must not allow.

We have all, through the MSOC, gained valuable experience and something of a Marxist-Leninist education. It is high time now to step out of our isolation, our mediocrity, our errors--and advance into the struggle for the construction of the revolutionary communist party. What we have learned in the Mass Strike we must now put to use, as disciplined adherents of a nationally implemented transitional program. We must join the Spartacist League.