

Fight Sectarianism – Build Party Unity with the Masses

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EXCERPTS FROM A NATIONAL COMMITTEE REPORT TO THE PARTY, JULY, 1971

The present political situation is wide open. The bosses have launched their sharpest attack against workers in decades. This attack covers all aspects of life: speed-up, layoffs, intensified racism, welfare cutbacks, rent increases, increased police harassment. The U.S. ruling class is in trouble, and they are trying to bleed the workers dry in order to get out of it.

Conditions are ripe for rebellion. The bosses know this. They are afraid to organize even the most conventional sellout movement. because they understand that it could easily blow up in their faces. They got a taste of workers' anger recently in Brownsville, N .y ., when a bunch of reformers and nationalists organized a pro-liberal rally, and thousands of people tore the place apart, burning buildings and shooting at cops.

Our party has an unparalleled opportunity to move ahead in the coming period. A great deal has already been accomplished. In the past eighteen months, since the decision was made to reach out to the working class with communist ideas, many workers have come closer to and have joined the party. In every place where we have made an effort to build Challenge-Desafio clubs, they have attracted numbers of stable, militant workers, many of them black or Spanish-speaking.

However, this is not a time to pat ourselves on the back or congratulate ourselves for past accomplishments. While we have moved ahead slowly in the last year and a half, we have barely begun to touch the tip of the iceberg. We can and should be doing much more to advance the class struggle and win masses to our party and its base. Only our own weaknesses prevent us from doing so.

The national committee feels at this time that sectarianism is the principal obstacle holding back the work. This manifests itself particularly in the low level of our participation in mass struggle. The decision to concentrate heavily on the sale of Challenge-Desafio was correct and indicates that workers will respond directly to communist ideas. However, often this work .is carried out in a one-sided manner, as though we believed that a revolution can be made by only hawking a communist paper on a street corner or by organizing small groups of people to discuss the ideas in the paper .

In a period like the present, many people will follow the direct leadership of a communist party. Our recent experience proves this. Without our open agitational work, we could not survive as a revolutionary organization. On the other hand, many others -- millions -- want to fight, have to fight, but do not yet see the need for a revolutionary party, working class dictatorship, or socialism. Virtually all of these people are winnable to the party's ideas, but we cannot win them if we take the attitude that we are interested in them only if they join Challenge-Desafio clubs, sell the paper regularly, and subscribe sight unseen to every nuance of the party's line. The logic of doing work only with the "most advanced" sections of the masses leads to the belief that only a small elite understands what life is all about and that everyone else is too limited. This is the line the Trots take: "Go ahead and struggle on your own. You'll find

out soon enough how dumb you are. Then we'll step in with our recipe for instant revolution and 'help' you."

Millions of people are engaged in countless forms of struggle every day of the year. All of these struggles are over reform issues. Workers have to fight back in order to survive. If we don't join these fights, help lead them, and integrate ourselves with the people who are waging them, how can we win masses to socialism? If people in a neighborhood want to organize to get their garbage picked up, if workers in a factory want to fight compulsory overtime, if people want better medical care, if a group of tenants wants the boiler fixed, on what basis are we going to win them to socialism if we hold back from participating in their fight to stay alive?

Of course, there is a right way and a wrong way to engage in reform struggles. Earl Browder once said that the old C.P. was the best reform organization that ever existed in the U.S. He was probably right.

But the C.P. died because it made the revisionist error of never winning anybody to revolutionary ideology. We can learn from this experience. Carrying out this work correctly is not easy. Every time we fight over an issue, we have to try to advance the political understanding of those with whom we unite. We have to raise the party line. On the other hand, we can sabotage a struggle and drive potential friends away if we try to make absolute agreement on the party's line a condition for building the united front. In addition, we cannot make the opportunist error of putting forth any issue regardless of its politics. We would not support a fight for black foremen, more minority cops, or community control of anything.

There are potential dangers in doing this work, and we have to try to avoid them. But we are now in danger of making the biggest error of all by not doing the work in the first place. It is always possible to make opportunist errors in united front activity, but this does not mean that united front activity in and of itself is "opportunist." If we believed this, then we would limit ourselves to working with a tiny handful of ideological "purists." We would say that the only things in life that weren't "opportunist" were selling Challenge-Desafio and debating the ideas in it. In the meantime, millions would go on fighting the bosses without us, and at best we would be useless to their struggles.

To the extent that the party has held back from engaging in mass struggle and united front work, the national committee believes that it is primarily to blame for giving inadequate and incorrect leadership. Sectarianism in the party begins with the national committee. In the first place, some of us have resisted giving leadership to the party in mass struggle. In the second place, we took the lead in offering 'political' rationales for not doing the work: some of us were among the first to put forth that working in large mass struggles and organizations would inevitably compromise our line. Finally, the national committee comrades who did view this position as sectarian did not struggle hard enough against it within the national committee.

1. Recently, the party and some of its friends held a steel conference in the Midwest to prepare for the possibility of a strike in the industry and to form a national caucus of steel workers. The conference was a very positive development. Thirty steel workers from several cities attended. This would have been unthinkable a year ago and represents real progress. However, a sectarian plan of work was developed. What emerged from the conference was the idea that these thirty steel workers and anybody else they could get should invade the union hall to demand either a strike or no sellout. Militancy in this situation is a good thing. We should be militant in all our activities. But this plan could only have led to demoralization and the quick negation of earlier good work, because it did not contain an approach of unity with masses of steelworkers. At best it was a plan for "exemplary" action of a one-shot variety, not a plan to involve masses in struggle. The plan that should have emerged at this conference and that the party will now try to carry out to rely on the thirty workers who came to the conference to build local on-the-job caucuses, to fight around local grievances in shops. We already have the names of 1,000 steel workers in the Midwest. Most of them are not yet ready to adopt the entire program of a communist party, but many undoubtedly want to help lead fights against the boss and the union phoney. If we can win ourselves and those friendliest to us to wage struggles alongside these

1,000 workers -- and we believe that we can -- then we can begin to build the foundations of rock-solid base of support for our party in one the major industries in the U.S.

2. Recently, an East Coast area conference of college teachers and graduate students was held in New England. One hundred and fifty people attended the conference, which was sponsored by the University Action Group, an SDS-type faculty organization we are helping to build. In terms of numbers, this conference represented a breakthrough in the work and reflected at least some ass ties. The party attempted to put forth its le on culture at this conference. In and of itself, this was good, but the line was advanced in such a way that those who disagreed with it would have to feel that the party regarded them as hopeless reactionaries. The overwhelming majority of people at the conference were not party members; presumably, many of them did not agree with the party line. If we did not change our approach, we would find ourselves in the foolish position of making these people believe that we had called a conference merely to tell them that we considered em our enemies! This sectarianism was compounded by a plan for another conference to be held in the fall. This plan proposed to gather five hundred people for a discussion of the finer points revolutionary communist ideology and theory. A conference with such an agenda would help the work; would undoubtedly involve a lot of struggle; perhaps we should call one. But, we should not entertain the illusion that at the present time we can get five hundred intellectuals to debate the party's line and nothing else. If we could get even two hundred people to a conference to discuss establishing the U.A.G. as a broad-based campus organization of faculty and graduate students, we would be making progress. Working in a broad-based organization means working with people who have disagreements with us on many issues. We should discuss our disagreements in a principled way; we should never hide our politics. But if faculty members who do not agree with us that capitalist universities and culture are thoroughly rotten and must be smashed want to fight around racism, layoffs, jobs, or anything else within the aim of principle, then we can never win them to our full position unless we fight alongside them in the struggles they want to wage now. The party now has the outlook of helping to build for a UAG conference in the fall that will involve as many people as possible in a discussion or program and activity for the organization. We will certainly raise our independent line in this context -- but in such a way as to build the V.A.G., not turn it into a fake "socialist club."

3. In NYC, the party and its friends recently carried out a plan of attack against municipal budget and tax hearings. We went down to City Hall three times. The first action was excellent. It involved 150 people. It was very militant, with chanting, arrests, and fighting against the cops. Only forty came to the second hearing, however. Many were reluctant to go. Some called the action adventurist. Others raised fear of the cops. Others said that since the point had been made once, it was unnecessary to make it again. The forty comrades and friends who did show up carried out another militant action that was warmly applauded by virtually everyone who heard about it. The third time, no objections were raised, but only thirty people showed up. Again, within the framework of its limitations, the action was worthwhile and enabled us to move ahead. These is sues affect just about everybody in NYC . Objectively, we can unite with millions around this issue, and right now, we should be able to involve hundreds directly in actions of the type described above. Naturally, if the best we can do is to involve the same handful of people, then battle fatigue will set in very quickly, and the work will soon degenerate. If, on the other hand, we take the viewpoint that almost everybody -- neighbors, friends on the job, fellow students in the schools and colleges -- is a potential ally in this fight, if we unite with them in caucuses, committees, etc. to launch struggles around their immediate grievances, then we will be able to win many, many more to larger party-wide actions and eventually to the party. We have to win ourselves and our friends in Challenge Clubs to this perspective. Many other examples could be brought forth to illustrate the need to overcome sectarianism in our work. They all point to one conclusion: We have to immerse ourselves in mass struggles and join forces with the millions who are fighting the ruling class now and the thousands who have already shown that they want to unite with our party. There will be many tactics to make use of accomplishing this process. In some cases, we will have to set up groups ourselves. In other cases, we will work with groups that already exist. In some cases, we will be able to engage in higher forms of struggle more rapidly than in others. The key question here is whether or not we understand the main idea of "Road to Revolution III -- to rely on the masses to carry out and advance our line. Everyone we meet, everyone we know, everyone we bring around the party has contradictions with the ruling class. These contradictions are sharpening. Every day, whether we recognize

it or not, we encounter dozens of possibilities for developing left-center coalitions against the bosses. The fact that we have not grasped and acted upon the need to do so sooner is a sign of political flabbiness on our part. The national committee bears the primary responsibility for this.

We believe that virtually everyone in the party can be won to participate in broad forms of mass action and struggle. On the basis of its independent work alone, the party has already emerged in many areas as the leading force in opposition to the ruling class. If we can expand the work and engage in sharper fights involving greater numbers of people, we can come forth even more as the revolutionary vanguard of all oppressed workers in the U.S.

None of the above is in contradiction to the continued growth of our independent work. On the contrary: the more actions we build, the more fights we launch, the more will we be able to spread our ideas and win people to them. Our party exists for the purpose of waging class war against the bourgeoisie. No battle or skirmish in this war is too small to be overlooked. No aspect of the class struggle is so "insignificant" that we should stand aside from it. We will make many errors in the process of conducting this struggle. We will suffer casualties. But the main thing is that if we unite with masses in the class struggle, we will grow. If we carry out the line and rely on the people, our base will mushroom, and will make PLP a revolutionary party of the working class.

THINGS ARE WIDE OPEN -- ONLY WE CAN STOP OURSELVES

One would have to be deaf, dumb and blind not to realize that the bourgeoisie is in deep trouble. The growing crisis is manifested by the "Pentagon Papers." Unquestionably, these papers must undermine the confidence in the state apparatus among the people. These papers have appeared because the bosses are in trouble, and a great fight is raging in their ranks over how best to wiggle out of their present situation.

The political and economic crisis the bosses are in explains -- in part -- our being able to make advances these past two years. But this would have been impossible if we hadn't come forward more boldly among workers. Whatever actions we now take in N.Y.C. we involve a considerable number of workers, especially black and Latin. Our study groups are more heavily weighted with workers especially minority workers.

Throughout the party many more people have political relations and ties to people at work and at home. These ties explain why we have been able to involve many more people in action than ever. It also explains why the party is slowly growing. But, given the objective situation, we should and can be making greater progress. There are still many weaknesses in the work. These weaknesses hold us back and prevent us from fully capitalizing on the objective situation, or from fully exploiting the growth in or around the party. In this paper, we would like to deal with one: Base-building. What has to be said isn't exactly new. But we should sum up problems of base-building and its relation to the work -- taking into account our current situation.

Very often people in the party raise objections or questions about carrying forward mass action. They explain that they are very busy "base building." They conclude that mass activity against the bosses -- whether larger party wide actions, such as March 20-May Day-June 19, or even job or community actions -- contradicts their efforts to "base build." Naturally, it is a good thing that people have been won to the idea of "base building." Certainly, the party leadership doesn't want to do anything which will injure this development. But what we have to examine is: What are we building? and, in some cases, are we building anything?

When we develop ties to people one object is to win them to the party. Winning people to the party isn't an abstraction. It means winning people to fight the bosses with communist ideas. It means relying on the masses to grasp these ideas, enlarge them, and put them into practice. If you could sum up the essential aspect of our line

expressed in "Road to Revolution III" or in previous periods, the thing which should emerge is reliance on the workers. Our line is that people can be won to socialism and that they will try to carry this idea forward within the context of the present situation. So, revisionism in this period can basically be measured by what kind of a base you have or are building and who is being won to the party. This is opposed to the old idea that first people have to be won to "advanced" capitalist ideas which then act as a transmission belt to socialist ideas and action. We have been saying that this is wrong, because any bourgeois idea, holds back the class struggle and gains are often more illusion than reality .

So any base which is being built is not in contradiction to the party line, because the party line is .for the workers to be won to socialism and carry the class struggle forward. Well, people say everyone we know isn't yet won to the party line. Fair enough. But if you have been in the party a considerable length of time and have not been able to win anyone to the party line then there is something wrong. Obviously, the ties to people are then less than adequate. Many people have not yet thoroughly integrated their lives with those people whom they are trying to win. This is why we often hear of being too busy to organize. What can we be so busy doing? Presumably we are trying to build our base consistently. This always puts us in touch with people who, we are trying to win to an action, to a group, to the party.

Now there are many people who have some ties, see people regularly , and win people to the party. Good. But what kind of leadership do we give these people. Do we exhibit them as our "base?" Do we drag them around to every function without considering how they should develop their ties? After all, these people aren't "ours." They are potential communists who should be leading other workers in struggle. But there is a reluctance to give this kind of leadership to people won closer to the party. This reluctance has several aspects. Firstly, we have a bad sectarian trait of not trusting people. We are afraid to give them their head. We are afraid to share responsibilities or spread them out. Secondly, some people become very proud that they have won some people and display this like new clothes. They forget that political preening isn't what we are after. New people often can go further than us and be more effective. Presumably, this could be the case because many of the newer people in or around the party are workers with many ties and years of experience on the job or in their community. So there is a holding back, because we might be outdone or because more action by new people will force us to do more. After all, if we win people to class struggle, then they will expect us to do at least as much as they.

Finally, this leads to the point of no return; because more struggle means more fighting with the boss and his stooges. More fighting means more casualties -- jail, getting hurt, etc .So there is a tendency to cool it. At the moment the class struggle is sharpening. This period requires more action, boldness -- not retrenchment or retreat. If people are hit .with more unemployment, racism, higher rent, higher food prices, less schools and hospitals, more garbage et. al., it isn't exactly the period to be more cautious. Now, there is a thin line between boldness and recklessness. And this must be determined at every point. But one yardstick which can be used is the issues involved; are they of concern to large numbers of people? and can we involve others in the action? This brings us full turn to the original point -- what kind of a base if any do we have? If we have to start each activity off from scratch, people will have little enthusiasm for the action. They know they will have to go out and beat the bushes for some contacts to produce. This inherently creates sectarian one-sided relations. If people think that the only basis for the relation is being called to an action or meeting, will they resent it? They may come to one or two but, not really being won to the politics, they tend to disappear. Naturally, people in the party don't like to go through this procedure, so they recoil from action with the exclamation: "What! another one?" If on-going relations exist, these relations, which can spread to many others, as well as new contacts, should always keep the party in touch with numbers of people who can be won to action -- not by badgering, but by understanding the politics. If our ties with people are thin or non-existent, then we don't really carry out the line of the party, and of course, the party actions become an absolute curse.

It is hard to believe that with all the problems people face there couldn't be more people coming forward to take

initiative. Certainly, this problem should ease in a period of intense class struggle. If base-building becomes a crutch by which to avoid the class struggle, then base-building is misunderstood or people do not really want to build a base.

During the past year our party in NYC has come into contact with thousands. This has come about because of paper sales, ever growing mass action, and because many people are bringing new people around. But how many people slip through our fingers by default? Many people brought around are really followed up. There may be a phone call, a visit, etc. But that isn't sufficient. People must be asked over to our homes. We must ask people to go out with us, etc. People should not feel that we are interested in them basically as a "communist body count." Sure -- "we can't win them all now." But we could be winning many more. A good deal of our time is spent indulging ourselves, not the party. We are still reluctant, afraid to ask a name, a phone number, an address. Without an expanding base, problems of organization }are difficult to solve. For example, we won many people to go down to the first City Council Hearing on the Budget. Generally, the action was excellent. In the shops, communities and schools of these people.. PL members and friends were further identified as those people fighting the ruling class. In case after case, workers gave money for bail and noted the fact that the party and its friends were the only ones fighting. However people were reluctant to go back to the second budget hearings. Some said it would be adventurist. Some just said plainly that they were afraid of the cops. Some said it conflicted with their basebuilding. Others said the point had been made at the first hearing; why do it again? In and of themselves anyone of these objections could have merit. None of them were outlandish. But the main problem wasn't raised; how come party members and their friends couldn't bring more people to the budget hearings? After all, the budget cuts affect many others besides the party forces. And the overwhelming sympathy of the workers in the city was on the side of the party. Person after person exclaimed, "that they were glad someone was fighting the budget cuts."

If people didn't have to come alone they would be less afraid and it wouldn't conflict with base-building. The point could be made again and again that involvement with other people would clear away the question of adventurism. In as much as the budget cuts and other attacks are the sharpest in modern times, it paid to go again and again", despite our obvious weaknesses. By the third hearings, people went (by and large alone) with little argument but with little enthusiasm. On balance every one agrees that we did right and that it helped us to draw people closer as they saw the party as a fighting party. But we all know that we could have done better. With the class struggle growing each moment more action is required each day. Many people don't like this, because it leaves them little "breathing room." We should welcome stepped up action because it means it brings us a little closer to beating the ruling class. I(each action is viewed as something unto itself rather than another battle in a protracted war we will lose heart. Battles and actions all have to be evaluated by whether they help us win new people; has the party grown? Are we in a better or worse situation to go ahead? And finally, what errors did we make so we can correct them and improve. Wars are made up of zillions of battles and skirmishes. They appear never ending. War with guns is only one level of the war. The nature of the war now is mass action. Unless we develop mass action to greater and greater heights the war with guns is just a fool's dream. If we are tired WE should rest. But we should know the war goes on and when our rest is over we go back to the front. One thing is certain the ruling class will still be there. They aren't about to yield power without a fight.

In this period of growing class struggle both within the party and without, building a base becomes all important. Virtually every person that left the party over the years with some big pronunciamento was isolated. Almost all of them, in sequence, have gone into political oblivion. Politicos without a base are useless and impotent. Politicos who build a base on opportunism are dangerous and harmful. We can only prove the correctness of our politics to the extent we can involve people. If we fail to do this we too shall become impotent and extinct. People are open to our ideas; they will take the paper if we bring it to them; and some will become involved with the party if we LET THEM.

At this stage in the class struggle it is possible to build a base. No one in the party should be isolated. More to the

point, we should win our new friends to build their base, enter other groups, win more and more people to the line. We should not let the party get identified in people's minds as a group of loners. "If I can get my one person I can be in or around the party also." Party members must become leaders of people. Workers must respect the party because the party is part of the people. Party members who still have great fear of the people will not be party members for long. As pointed out, "differences" usually spring up out of isolation. Some leave as friends; others as enemies -- but the essence is the same -- isolation.

Because of hammer-like blows from the ruling class, and because more and more people realize the inability of this system to satisfy their needs, the working class reaches out for our party. Don't dodge; don't duck. Grasp those hands because this is the only way the working class and the party can survive. This is the only way we can win. All of our current experiences show us that the party and the working class are filled with fighters who want to win other fighters. We must bear down.

By the time the summer is over we will try and get the entire party in a better position for the fight ahead. We will try and intensify the struggle for base-building (confidence in the working class) in all our clubs, groups, etc. We cannot afford isolation and we cannot afford complacency -- because the work is going ahead. This progress can easily be reversed if we allow opportunism to grow in our ranks. Interestingly enough, people in the party who have little or no base complain the loudest about how mass action is contradictory to base-building; or how the party leadership is remiss in fighting for base-building. Comrades, relax. The party's base will grow. Perhaps yours won't. We will try to get it to grow. If we do not succeed we can try other forms of organization so we can continue to work together around those things we find mutuality on. **BUT THE PARTY WILL BUILD ITS BASE.**