

A CRITIQUE OF THE PROPOSED "OUTLINE FOR PARTY BUILDING
PHASE OF DISCUSSIONS"

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Thanks to Robin and Fernando for feedback on the ideas
of an early rough draft of this paper.

I'd like to discuss and get criticism on the ideas in
this paper from anyone who is interested.

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I. OVERVIEW OF THIS PAPER

The Outline for the Party Building Phase of Discussions contains a comprehensive list of most of the key questions Marxist Leninists must ask in the process of building a communist organization. However, I think that the methodology employed to frame the questions has some serious weaknesses. The result is that the questions are not posed in a way which will achieve their intent: to move us forward toward building a communist organization.

Here is a summary of my criticisms:

1. Objective Factors

The questions posed under "Objective Factors" overlook some qualitatively new factors that have developed in the past two years. The omission is due to a methodological failure to analyze concretely the contemporary U.S. political economy. What results is a failure to identify the totality of class forces in motion in the present period, and to consider their internal contradictions.

2. Subjective Factors

Because of the methodological weakness underlying the questions posed under "Objective Factors," the questions posed under "Subjective Factors" do not provide their intended guide to the necessary interrelationships between the objective and subjective factors. They assume a methodology of party building (priority of study over practice) which is not appropriate to the new objective situation.

Furthermore, the generalized way in which the questions are posed allows us to make a separation between the study of the questions, and the practice necessary to be able to adequately reach unity on the answers.

3. Present Situation within the Communist Movement

The title of this topic somewhat implicitly limits our attention to those organizations which call themselves part of the "communist movement." It therefore does not seem to take seriously the ideologies and organizations created by leftists in the women's movement or revolutionary nationalists. (I will not deal with these omissions in this paper, but I do seriously question these omissions.)

The use of labels, such as "revisionists," "dogmatists," and "Trotskyists" substitutes definitions for specific analysis of what people in these categories actually say and do to make them warrant the categories. We are then left without a methodology for understanding how to relate to what they say and do in particular situations.

4. What kind of Communist Organization do we need?

These questions compound the methodological weaknesses of the previous three topics:

a. The questions do not assume any necessary relationship between objective factors and the process of party building in this period;

b. The questions imply that studying the process of party building can be separated from the practice of building an organization;

c. The questions imply that unity on organizational questions can be separated from the process of building unity on political questions that arise from practice analyzed by study.

In the rest of this paper, I shall try to lay out an alternative methodology for approaching party building questions, and then give one detailed example of how this methodology might be applied.

II. AN OUTLINE METHODOLOGY FOR ASKING PARTY BUILDING QUESTIONS

A. HOW DO WE ANALYZE "OBJECTIVE FACTORS?"

The questions listed under the outline topic of "Objective Factors" are an abbreviated way of saying:

"U.S. imperialism is weakening on a world wide scale. The ruling class is taking out its contradictions on the U.S. working class (and presumably also, the oppressed nationalities and women, some of whom may not be in the working class). Yet, in spite of the intensified ruling class attacks, the U.S. working class has not yet manifested the necessary class consciousness to effectively begin to fight back against these attacks. (Or, alternatively, the working class has begun to manifest the necessary class consciousness to fight back.)"

The party-building movement has been making this general analysis for the past 6 or 7 years (since communists began to identify party building as a primary task on a national scale). The analysis, in its general terms, is true. But, in its particularities, it is inaccurate. The weakness of this analysis has manifested itself particularly in the last 2 years.

The analysis is based on certain assumptions about the contemporary U.S. political economy, and about the classes within ~~this~~

this economy. This assumption is: under present monopoly capitalism there are only two major classes pitted against each other: a small, but increasingly powerful ruling class, and a large, but increasingly divided, working class.

This, the outline poses questions about the ruling class (U.S. imperialism in crisis) and the working class (class consciousness and class struggle). It assumes that by analyzing the interactions of these two classes alone, we can get a fairly adequate overview of contemporary objective factors.

I believe that this view of the U.S. economic system expresses a failure to analyze the particular features of contemporary (essentially, since World War II), U.S. monopoly capitalism. Therefore, there is a failure to identify a significant new class development whose beginning class consciousness is playing a significant role in the present period (1977-78).

In order to make this point clear, I want to present a brief analysis (which goes beyond methodology) of what I consider to be the particularities of contemporary monopoly capitalism and its resulting new class formation.

(The analysis is indebted to the following sources:

- 1) Mickey Ellinger, "We Cant Go Home Again: Working Women in the Age of Imperialism" -- out of print
- 2) Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital
- 3) Jim Russell, "Marxist Class Analysis"
- 4) Jim Russell, "The Theory of the New Middle Class" (draft paper)

1. Pertinent factors in contemporary monopoly capitalism

- a. policy of increased domestic spending after WWII to help prevent another depression

This resulted in providing millions of families within the relatively higher paid -- and predominantly white -- sectors of the working class with the opportunity to become suburban home owners and acquirers of personal property bought on credit.

The result was to create a geographical as well as life style division within the working class. Ideologically, it was expressed in "We are all middle class." This division is proving to be at least as important (sometime more important) than stratifications within the workplace, by industry, between organized and unorganize, employed and unemployed, etc.)

- 2 b. consolidation, centralization, control over the economy by major financial and industrial institutions; vast internal stratifications within these institutions of division of labor.

This has provided the basis for the development of a new class in contemporary monopoly capitalism: the new middle class. The new middle class is made up of highly trained and salaried professionals, managers and administrators. It differs from the traditional old petty bourgeoisie in that the new middle class is directly within the labor/capital relationship; whereas the old petty bourgeoisie was and is outside this relationship. The old petty bourgeoisie is shrinking under monopoly capitalism. The new ~~mid~~ middle class is still growing, and now represents about 15% of the U.S. population.

- c. The state has become the major economic support for monopoly capitalism.

The state now employs about 1/5 of the working population. The majority of these employees are within the working class, but a disproportionately large number are in the new middle class. The state trains a large proportion of the work force for capitalism through public education. The state directly or indirectly subsidizes monopoly capitalism both at home and overseas. The state also provides social services for the increasingly large sector of the working class that has been thrown into the reserve army of the unemployed because of the consolidation of monopoly capitalism.

All of these state functions are made possible through taxes. A disproportionately large amount of these taxes (both income tax and property tax) are paid by the homeowners of the working class and the new middle class. Yet, these sectors of the population receive apparently little visible return from their taxes. Their salaries are too high to qualify them for social services (unless they get unemployed). They do not own capital so they don't reap the benefits from the state's support of capitalism (except for grants to some sectors of the new middle class).

2. Class organization and class consciousness

Much of the upper sector of the working class is organized in unions. These unions have fought militantly against eroding standard of living and working conditions, but the most they have won is a holding action. Sectors of the new middle class have been organized professionally, but are now beginning to organize politically.

The upper sectors of the working class and organized sectors of the new middle class have felt the effects of the economic crisis. Their standard of living has been threatened. Wives have had to go to work to supplement husband's incomes, and family life has been threatened. Working conditions for sectors of the new middle class have worsened; professional "independence" and "creativity" has been restricted. People are pissed off.

These two class sectors have begun to revolt. Because of their apparent geographical and life style similarities, and their apparent lack of share of the benefits of their taxes, they have begun to see interests in common. Thus far, these interests have been expressed by supporting the ruling class's attacks on the rest of the working class, rather than seeing the ruling class as the source of their problems.

The political expression of this revolt is popularly called the rise of the right wing. It has resulted in an increasingly intersecting formation of cross-class alliances around issues such as Jarvis-Gann, the Briggs initiative, opposition to affirmative action and the democratic rights of women and minorities, anti-abortion movements, anti-ERA movements, anti-labor movements, etc.

This revolt may, and probably is, financed by parts of the ruling class. But what is the qualitatively new factor in the present period is that the ruling class now has a mass, politically class conscious base of support for its attacks on the working class.

This qualitatively new factor requires a major re-thinking of what party building means in the present period.

B. WHAT ARE THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE FACTORS?

The "Outline for Party Building Discussions" suggests a period of from 6 to 8 months during which we will discuss the questions on the outline. People's practice may be brought in to illuminate the discussion, but practice will not be the focus of the discussion.

The assumption behind the proposal is that the initial stage of party building for us in 1978 should be essentially the same as it has been for communists over the past 6 or 7 years. That is, the primary task of communists in this period is study, discussion and ideological struggle in order to build political, then organizational unity. Practice would be important, but only to illuminate the study, or to begin to test the political ideas that develop out of this study.

I disagree about the primary task. I believe that the qualitatively new objective factors of the past two years requires us to reassess these priorities. Specifically, I think that practice must now be the priority. Study and ideological struggle to achieve political and organizational unity must be specifically geared to the requirements of that practice.

Except for work around the Bakke decision, Marxist-Leninists have been conspicuously absent from the struggles to combat the growing class alliances of the new right wing. In California, communists are just beginning to take up the issues around Jarvis-Gann.

I believe that in the current period it is a political priority for leftists in general, and for Marxist-Leninists in particular, to work actively to strengthen the working class's fight back against ruling class attacks; and to work as much as is possible to try to win sectors of the new right wing alliance away from their support of the ruling class attacks, and toward an alliance with the working class's fightback.

My proposed shift in priorities for party builders does not mean an abandonment of study and ideological struggle. It means a profound reassessment of how we study, and what questions we struggle around.

In terms of the questions asked under the topic "Subjective Factors," it means rephrasing these questions so that they are directly tied to the requirements of analyzing and guiding our practice. Examples of these rephrased questions are included in the last section of this paper.

C. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "PRACTICE" IN THIS PERIOD OF PARTY BUILDING?

Although the Outline does not specifically use the word "practice," most of the questions require some knowledge or experience of practice (whether theoretical, mass political or organizational) in order to be able to adequately answer them.

Many of us in the process have talked of the need to relate study to practice, but we have had different, or unclear conceptions about what each other meant by "practice."

Our lack of clarity stems, I think, from our attempt to define practice. Yet trying to arrive at a definition of practice is an undialectical way of approaching the problem. "Practice," like most terms in a Marxist's vocabulary, is a relational concept.

In the broadest sense, practice is the relationship between human beings' creative capacities and their task-directed efforts to obtain food, clothing and shelter, to maintain and reproduce themselves. As human capacity improves, the practice improves. Survival tasks become more organized and efficient. The ability to improve the practice in its turn increased the human's capacities. And ~~when~~ when 2 or more humans take on these tasks together, their practice and capacities qualitatively expand.

This constant interrelationship of capacities, tasks, practice and organization is as true for what we usually call "political practice" as for survival practice in the broad sense. We set tasks (to further the revolutionary struggle); we begin practice at whatever our present level of capacities (level of theoretical development and experience from past practice); we organize to accomplish our tasks. Our practice improves -- hopefully -- as our capacities improve. Our capacities grow as our practice improves. Our organization strengthens both capacities and practice, and is in turn strengthened by them. The tasks become more effectively carried out.

How can we apply this understanding of practice ~~xxxxxx~~ to the present period of our organization building, if we accept the thesis that practice is primary in this period?

1. Practice in relation to the new objective factors

As many of us as possible in our "process" should try to get involved with groups of people who are not primarily leftists, but who are pissed off about what's happening to them in this period.

2. Practice in relation to individual capacities

Our process includes people with different levels of experience in practice (new to the left or old veterans), and with different skills in forms of practice (theoretical, mass political, alternative institutions, cultural and educational, organizational, etc). It includes people with full time jobs and families, and those with less work and/or family commitments.

Because of these differences, at the beginning of our party building discussions, people should choose an area of practice they feel will help develop their capacities, yet which is realistic in terms of their commitment and time situations.

As we begin to grow closer organizationally and politically, we can begin to assess these individual choices to see how relevant they are to both the objective factors and the tasks we set ourselves (subjective factors and organizational development).

These assessments, and the method we develop to make them, will be a vital part of our growing capacities, both as individuals and as a budding organization.

3. Practice in relation to building political unity

We should make an effort, as much as possible, to work with others in our process in our mass work. We can learn from each other, give critical concrete feedback to each other, bring back the political questions from our mass work which will deepen and clarify our party building questions.

Thus, our growing political unity will be directly tied to our study, our growing organizational unity, and will be directly related to the objective factors.

4. Practice in relation to study

The necessities of our practice will force us to constantly reassess the methods and content of our study, as well as the priority we decide to give to certain topics of study.

In other words, our practice will help us ~~Study practice in relation to organizational building~~ determine "What are party building questions?"

5. Practice in relation to organization building

In addition to practice in mass work, as many of us as possible should take on some area of specific organization practice. This might involve working on the newsletter, chairing a meeting, helping to plan a program of study, initiating an analysis of some sector of mass work, making contacts with other organizations, etc.

For those of us who haven't had past organization building experience, this form of practice is really essential. How else can we have a real basis for answering the tough organizational questions under "What kind of communist organization do we need?"

Sharing the organizational work is also necessary to take the burden off our present coordinating committee. These people have to be able to participate in some form of mass work in order to keep abreast of the relationship of members' practice to our proposed program of study. They need some time off from organizational responsibilities in order to do this.

As our organization consolidates, some forms of division of practice tasks become necessary. Some people will spend more time in theoretical practice; others in mass practice; others in organizational practice. But we need to develop methods from the beginning that work to prevent these necessary divisions of tasks from becoming separations between leadership and membership.

6. Practice in relation to framing party building questions

If we look carefully at the various questions on the outline, we can see that each question needs a different level of practice, or form of practice, in order to be able to answer it effectively. Without a corresponding experience of the appropriate practice, the answers to these questions would remain in the most general and abstract framework. Methodologically, the separation of study and practice is one of the sure roads to dogmatic thinking.

We need to look at each question to determine what forms and levels of practice are necessary in order to be able to answer them. We should re-order the questions to correspond to our current levels of both individual and organizational practice, such that the discussion of each question pushes our current practice forward just a little bit more. Let's not skip steps and assume we can answer everything at once.

For example: We can study PWOC's concept of fusion to get a general idea of what it means. We deepen our study with individual's examples of their attempts to do this. But we need to work together in a common task or workplace to really be able to understand all its complexities.

D. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "STUDY" IN THIS PERIOD OF PARTY BUILDING?

Study is a relational term, as is "practice." Study is the process by which we strengthen and transform our individual and collective capacities, so that we can strengthen the struggle to transform the world. Therefore, how we study is as important, sometimes even more important, than what we study. In other words, our methodological approach to study helps to determine what we study and to what use we put our study.

Our method of study of any particular topic should be able to provide us with the tools (intellectual, emotional, moral, technical and practical) to find our bearings in new and unexpected situations that we haven't studied yet. "Follow the leader thinking" is not Marxist thinking. It is bourgeois thinking -- one manifestation of dogmatism.

The method of study which I believe will help us get our bearings in the forms of practice necessary to meet the new objective factors focus on key aspects of Marxist method. They are:

1. The method of dialectical and historical materialism

Studying this method cannot be accomplished simply by a quick reading of On Contradiction. We must study the ways in which Marx, Lenin, Mao, Ho and other masters of the method have used it so that we can learn how to apply it to the concrete problems of the tasks we face in our practice. We can learn to apply the method to conversations with a neighbor; to resolving contradictions between friends, lovers or comrades; to problems arising in coalitions; or to analyzing issues in our organizational development.

We can analyze the ways in which other communist organizations use (or abuse) the method in order to better understand the methodological sources of their strengths and weaknesses in line and practice.

2. The methodology of Marxist-Leninist political economy

This means more than reading "Wages, Prices and Profit" or "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism." It means being able to apply the methodology of political economy so that we can talk in a concrete way to our neighbor or co-worker who thinks women shouldn't have to work outside the home, or that the 'welfare chiselers' get most of their tax money.

3. The methodology of class analysis and consciousness

This means more than describing the present class developments in the U.S. It means being able to grasp the relationships between class exploitation, racial/national oppression and the oppression of women. It means being able to analyze the relationships between class position, class consciousness and its contradictions, and class organization.

We should be able to apply this method clearly enough so that we could explain to a Catholic mother and wife of an engineer why it really isn't in her interest to oppose Medi-Cal funding for abortions. Or, to be able to determine with some precision the relationship between class positions and ideological expressions in the tax revolt; and which forces are allies, which must be neutralized, and which will continue to side with the ruling class.

4. The methodology of the relationships between theory, practice and party building

This topic involves the constant, systematic sum up of our total study program, development of our practice and of our organization. It encompasses a variety of questions that must be addressed as we go along.

For example: How does our current understanding of class analysis help us develop an appropriate mass line on affirmative action in the light of Jarvis-Cann cutbacks? How much political unity on international line do we need to be able to work effectively together in an anti-apartheid coalition that is ~~run~~ under Communist Party leadership? What forms of concrete support can we give comrades on the Newsletter Committee who feel inadequate about their writing abilities? When is it appropriate or inappropriate to identify ourselves as members of a developing communist organization?

The assumption in back of the methodology of these questions is that theory, practice and organization building are interdependent, and cannot be conducted as separable activities. Yet there are obvious internal contradictions among these activities. The more self consciously we address ourselves to the method by which we resolve these contradictions, the more rapidly will our work in all these areas move forward.

III. WHAT ARE PARTY BUILDING QUESTIONS IN THIS PERIOD?

A. WHAT PARTY BUILDING QUESTIONS ARE NOT

1. They are not different in fundamental content from the questions posed by people organizing to change the conditions that oppress them.

In order for Marxist-Leninists to be able to relate meaningfully to the people we are trying to organize, we must be able to pose our questions in a form which will train us to participate effectively in the people's struggles.

We must learn how to listen to the questions they pose and their proposed answers. We must learn to analyze these questions and answers. We must be able to return to the people with a political line which people can grasp and which they begin to see moves their own work forward.

This does not mean that our party building questions -- the questions we ask ourselves -- are identical to those posed by people in motions. Nor are the answers identical. We will frame our questions differently because we use Marxist methodology to frame them. And we may answer them differently because we seek to relate the reform struggle to building the revolutionary struggle.

But the raw material of our questions must be politically relevant. They must start from where people are at. We must listen first; learn from our listening; analyze what we hear; speak out the results of our analysis; then listen again.

~~B. THEY ARE NOT STRICTLY ORGANIZATIONAL QUESTIONS~~

2. They are not strictly organizational questions.

If we were to try to build our unity primarily around internal organizational questions (such as: Should we practice democratic centralism on a local level?) or around organizational relationship to the class struggle (such as: What does fusion mean?), we would be upsetting the delicate interrelationship between theory, practice and organization building.

Furthermore, we would run the risk of becoming organizational chauvinists -- seeing our own organization building as more important than the struggles of the people. At its worst, this kind of thinking fosters an organizational loyalty that more closely resembles religious sect fanaticism than genuine communist commitment. (And, it is a very common error in present communist organizations.)

3. They are not the latest list of "burning questions of our movement"

Of course, we need unity around political line in order to form an organization. We already have a preliminary level of unity expressed in the list of "anti's" from our original political perspective. These "anti's" need to be turned into "pro's" in the process of our study and work together.

But we certainly don't need to have total positions on the international, national, woman, trade union, gay, revisionist questions, etc. before we come together.

Groups that put all their energy into this kind of theoretical work inevitably separate theory from practice. Plus, they usually produce materials that are incomprehensible to anyone without a post graduate degree in polemics-reading. And the stuff provides not concrete guide for daily work.

B. WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF ASKING PARTY BUILDING QUESTIONS?

In order to frame our questions appropriately at each stage of our development, we should have goals for these questions in mind. The process we go through to develop answers should fulfill these goals. Here's a sample list of possible goals:

1. Develop our abilities to think dialectically
2. Develop our abilities to think independently
3. Develop our abilities to make concrete investigations and analyses
4. Develop our abilities to learn from our mass practice
5. Help us improve our behavior so we win the trust and respect of people we are working with
6. Help us to decide collectively what our priorities should be
7. Help us decide what level of political unity we need to work together
8. Help us decide what areas what need political unity in, and when we need to develop this unity
9. Help us decide what forms of organizational work we need to create to carry out our tasks
10. Develop our abilities to analyze our own organizational processes
11. Help us assess what other organizations to build ties with; what level of ties; when to make the ties

C. EXAMPLES OF PARTY BUILDING QUESTIONS

Let us take as our "raw material" a question being asked by thousands of Californians at this time:

"What does Jarvis-Gann mean and how do we relate to it?"

The following party building questions appropriate to this "mass question" are arranged to follow the topics in the "Outline for Party Building Discussion." They are ordered under each topic in ascending order of the degree of mass practice, political unity and organizational development that would be needed to adequately deal with each question.

1. Objective Factors

- a. What is the role of the state in this issue?
- b. What is our class analysis of the forces involved in the tax revolt?
- c. Does the victory of Jarvis-Gann represent a trend toward fascism?
- d. What is the relationship of class interests to class ideologies in the pro Jarvis-Gann forces?
- e. Is racism a primary or secondary contradiction in the ideology of pro JG forces?
- f. How do we analyze the internal contradictions and shifting alliances before and after the election? (Pro and anti JG forces)
- g. Does the fight back against Jarvis Gann represent a quick burning fire, or the beginning of a long trend toward renewed working class consciousness?

2. Subjective Factors

- a. How do we assess the significance of electoral politics work at this point in time in California?
- b. How do we analyze the main allies, wavering allies, neutral forces and opportunist forces in the current fight back movements?
- c. What forms of cultural and educational work are appropriate to further the fightback?
- d. What is our primary purpose for working in Jarvis the fight back coalitions?
 - 1) to learn how to do good mass work?
 - 2) to further the general struggle?
 - 3) to develop good ties with people in movements?
 - 4) to identify and politically win over leadership?
 - 5) to recruit to our organization?
 - 6) to develop working ties with other leftists?
 - 7) to become leadership of the fightback?

3. Present Situation in the Communist Movement

- a. What organized left forces are in the various coalitions?
- b. Which groups can we unite with and around what issues?
- c. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the propaganda and agitation they are putting ~~xxxx~~ out around Jarvis Gann and the fightback?
- d. How do we learn to identify specific proposals or ~~xxxx~~ speeches as coming from particular groups?
- e. How do we learn to distinguish between a militant coalition activist and a member of a left group?
- f. How do we ~~xxxxxx~~ express our differences with other left groups in coalitions?

4. What Kind of an Organization do we Need?

- a. How do we deal with majority and minority opinions around fightback mass work?
 - 1) strategic differences
 - 2) tactical differences
- b. What internal organization forms should we develop to deal most effectively with our mass work in these coalitions?
- c. Should we concentrate forces in a few coalitions, work wherever we are, try to set up a coalition of our own?
- d. How much priority should we assign to theoretical practice, mass practice and organizational practice around the Jarvis Gann fightback?
- e. ~~Should~~ Under what circumstances should we identify ourselves as part of a developing communist organization, and when should we be silent about our affiliations?
- f. How much overall organizational priority should we give to work in the Jarvis Gann fightback struggle?
- g. How much priority should be given to making regional or national contacts with other left organizations involved in similar fightback struggles?