

SUMMATION OF THE FIRST BPC SEMI-ANNUAL RETREAT

Boston Political Collective

Introduction

In July, 1980, the BPC(ML) held its first retreat to sum-up the first six months of the collective, and to reach unity on the path for the coming period. We spent 2 days together discussing the errors and accomplishments of the past months, especially with regard to our task of internal consolidation, future tasks and the state of the "party building movement." We also initiated our new structure which includes: the executive committee, 4 external political practice fractions (anti-racism, anti-sexism, trade union and Chinatown), an outreach/recruitment committee, an organization committee, as well as special departments for advanced levels of study and developing a party building strategy.

This sum-up was drafted a while ago, and is now somewhat dated. In particular our views on the further decline of the "trend" are more developed. We are presently drafting a document on the state of the party building movement and our party building strategy. This will be circulated to all comrades close to the TR for struggle to unity around our future course.

Despite the fact that the sum-up is outdated, we are submitting it for the 2nd issue of the bulletin to share our experiences and level of development as a young and developing ML collective. Questions and comments are appreciated.

GENERAL SUMMATION

The BPC retreat was an important step in the process of building an all-sided communist organization in Boston based on the primacy of theory party building line. The retreat focused all the political attention and energy of the collective members on attempting to move the collective and the primacy of theory line forward in the US communist movement. Although the retreat brought some previously unencountered differences to the fore and left a number of differences unresolved, the dominant aspect was an advance in the analysis of the developments, frustrations concerns and anxieties of the first six months. The evaluation made at the retreat, although incomplete, was a necessary step if a thorough restructuring of the collective based on a clarification of its political direction was to be possible.

The restructuring of the collective was both political and organizational, reflecting our slowly developing sense of what it means to be a communist collective. Our new structure aims at an improved allocation of resources that will allow us to deal expeditiously with the most pressing tasks and to channel each cadre's energy into the tasks she or he is best suited for. At the same time, it provides the first mechanisms for combatting uneven development in all areas of work, e.g., a supplementary study for the less theoretically developed, and the involvement of all cadres, regardless of past experiences, in the theoretical and practical tasks of external political practice.

This new organizational structure reflects our new political priorities which require us to press forward, however slowly, on many fronts. While our process of internal consolidation is far from complete, we now realize that consolidation can only proceed with political clarity in the context of developing all-sided communist practice and building



the primacy of theory political line as a political force. We must therefore take up the tasks of deepening and popularizing the primacy of theory line, making concrete efforts in party building, and developing political practice.

This broadening of political focus demands a greater division of labor than the collective has had up to this point. Advancing the line and our party building tasks require greater centralization than we have been used to. Developing external political practice will mean a good deal of investigation and experimentation, and will require a more decentralized approach. The need for these different approaches reflects the state of our collective in confronting these tasks, and developing each strategy will aid our transition to an all-sided communist organization.

The retreat also produced some important breakthroughs in group dynamics. For one thing, there was a generally higher level of participation than usual. This was largely due to the kind of discussions which took place: everyone had something to say about the progress and frustrations of the first six months and their hopes for the political future of the collective. There was a basis for broad based discussion, in contrast to the narrower base for discussions during the dialectical materialism study and the struggle over the final formulations of internal documents. However, our inexperience in struggling over issues linked directly to the style of our personal participation in the collective gave rise to some unclear and poorly led struggles. This duality was most clear in the struggles over support, trust and commitment and over consciousness of race, class and sexual oppression. Although the struggle over these issues did open up new and necessary problems for future struggle and did increase our awareness of the importance, range and depth of these issues, the lack of clarity and leadership on these discussions made it impossible for us to make any great advances in unifying on positions around these issues. Nonetheless, by clarifying the importance of these issues and our continuing insufficient unity, the retreat served to push these items into their proper place of prominence on the collective's agenda in the upcoming period.

Lessons of the first six months - The evaluation fo our first six months led to a number of conclusions about how to reorient our work.

1. Developing a more political approach to internal consolidation - We all agreed that the task of internal consolidation was correctly treated as primary in the first six months. Consolidation had been achieved around numerous issues : 1. the utility of unity discussions before founding the BPC (although this tended to allow us to overestiamte the range of our unity); 2. the importance of getting the collective off the ground; 3. the importance of developing a new understanding of democratic centralism as an operative form of relations within a communist organization; 4. the importance of uniting around the Points of Unity; and 5. through our limited intervention directly into the party building movement, we consolidated around a. the correctness of the primacy of theory line (to the degree it has been developed and fully understood); b. the need to thoroughly break with revisionism and the importance of a knowledge of international communist history in



making that break; c. a new understanding of the OCIC (although not completely be design) and d. the need for a clear party building strategy. There was also general agreement that the collective is far from

- consolidated and that our practice has been flawed by two main errors:
- a. A theoreticist deviation which overstressed consolidation at the level of theory at the expense of consolidation at the political level. This error occurred primarily in the choice of dialectical materialism as the first collective-wide study topic. The basis for building the collective's unity therefore tended towards the abstract level of Marxist philosophy instead of the concrete level of PoT's unique political perspective. The level of abstraction provided a poor terrain for struggle, as few comrades could formulate their political concerns on that level and only a few more could follow the discussion when they did. In many discussions the political issues consequently remained at a subterranean level with the result that much political struggle was displaced to the points of unity discussions.
  - b. An "organization over politics" error which stressed the organizational consolidation of the collective, i.e., rules, assignments etc., over the need for consolidation around and development of the political line.

2. Deepening and popularizing the line - The first six months taught us just how much the collective's development and practice is constrained by the present undeveloped condition of the PoT line. While remaining confident in the line as correct as a real advance over the other contending party building lines, we realize that the PoT line is just beginning to develop the concrete politics that will demonstrate its uniqueness in the US communist movement. Symptomatic of this is both the uneven development of the various concepts in the writings of such theorists as Althusser, Poulantzas, Bettelheim and company and the uneven development among the PoT forces in understanding and developing these concepts in the context of the US. Despite the vast improvement in popularizing both the content and style of the TR, there are still considerable improvements to be made in this area. It is of the utmost importance, both for the consolidation of the collective and the development of the PoT "tendency" that attention be given to the development of what we call the "core politics" of the PoT line: key concepts and positions that distinguish the PoT problematic which can be the basis for future political lines.

3. Developing areas of weakness - Besides the general development of the line, the weakness of theory and practice associated with the PoT line in the specific areas of external political practice uneven development and the specific nature of race, sex and class oppression is a considerable obstacle to the development of a communist organization. On the first six months, the effects of this weakness manifested itself in a number of ways. External political practice had to be maintained on the absence of any collective guidance from or significant linkage to the collective and the collective was unable to initiate meaningful steps to improve this situation. While combatting uneven development has been part of our line since TR #8, uneven development itself was largely misunderstood and dealt with in a mechanical and reactive way.

As to the impact of race, sex, and class oppression on the internal practices of a communist organization, only racism was addressed even in a preliminary way, and then only as a result of a crisis.



In the future, we must develop a conscious approach to all these issues. And while we have no illusions that we can transform these areas of weakness into areas of strength in the next six months, it is both necessary and possible for our collective to lay the basis for a primacy of theory approach to these problems, and that we begin this process immediately.

### Future Tasks

Based on our evaluation of the first six months, the collective has identified three inter-related tasks that should focus our work in the next six months.

1) Internal consolidation. We must continue the process of internal consolidation of the collective, based on our evaluation of this process to date. We must concentrate on building the collective's political unity through a more politically focussed study plan and a more effective process of political struggle around contemporary issues. Internal consolidation will also depend on the advancement of the primacy of theory line. We must strengthen the political basis of the PoT line through the critical examination and articulation of the political and theoretical roots of the line (in Althusser, Bettelheim. et. al.) *for*

only such an examination can provide the kind of political clarity necessary for consolidating our own cadre. This kind of examination is also necessary for popularizing the PoT line through developing materials and study plans for local and national recruitment.

Consolidation depends on the advancement of the PoT line in the critical areas of combatting uneven development and the effects of class, race, and sex oppression, as well. Only the development of concrete strategies and structures to deal with these problems in the collective can lay the basis for the kind of recruitment that is needed to broaden our social base. Finally, internal consolidation requires the kind of common work and activity that will develop a basis for personal support and mutual trust. Study has clearly not been sufficient for this, and it was agreed that common mass work will be an important element in building solidarity. There was considerable controversy, however, on the importance of organized social and cultural activities in this process. (More on this below)

2) Party building. In the past, we have approached the question of party building primarily within the boundaries of the anti-dogmatist, anti-revisionist communist movement. As this movement has developed, however, the political basis of the movement has proven to be misleading. The political breaks that occurred over the consolidation of revisionism in the CPUSA and the adoption of a China's class collaborationist line on the Angolan revolution by the dogmatist sects were correct and necessary but



not sufficient for the establishment of a genuine ML movement. The shallowness of the lines of demarcation of our movement has become clear enough: both the fusionists and rectifiers, the dominant forces in the movement, have proudly adopted the economic deviation of ML which is the root of revisionist theory and practice; both forces have staunchly defended the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, on a basis that confirms our worst fears about the tendency for point 18 to liquidate the struggle against revisionism; and both forces dogmatically defend the pre-1956 world communist movement as generally correct and revolutionary, marred only by tactical errors. It would seem to be no accident that PoT is the only force in the p-b movement that still calls itself anti-dogmatist, the rest having settled for being anti-ultraleft or anti-left opportunist.

It seems unlikely, therefore, that the present anti-dogmatist anti-revisionist movement will unite into a party. The OC is consolidating at such a pace and on such a sectarian basis that it is no longer correct to attempt to struggle within it, although we *can* continue to struggle with the OC elsewhere in the party building movement. The rectification initiatives, *may provide more* opportunities for principled struggle, but they seem no more likely to share our politics or theory. In light of our present situation which sets limits on our possible intervention in party building and in light of the state of the present anti-dogmatist anti-revisionist movement, it is critical to understand that the terrain for party building struggle is much wider than that represented by the OC the rectification.

Our own PoT tendency remains tiny, but shows signs of growth. Like the collective's internal consolidation, developing the PoT tendency requires the development of a "core politics" that is accessible and can give direction to any comrade who is attracted to our line. PoT politics must also be linked to concrete struggles both in the mass movement and in the communist movement. Developing external political practice will be a start on the former; publication of a political bulletin, when we have the resources to do it, is a possibility for the latter. In the long run, building our tendency will be impossible without being able to provide guidance to communists in all areas of their work.

Even in the initial phase of developing the PoT tendency, we desperately need a party building strategy. Such a strategy must be a concrete process for building unity among MLs based on an analysis of who can be won to party building and how. Developing this strategy will require the attention of the most advanced comrades not only of the BPC but all PoT forces. The strategy must unite the existing PoT tendency, based on a process of struggle that will include all comrades who hold the PoT line.

3) External political practice. If our collective and the PoT tendency nationwide is to grow and flourish, external political practice must be fully integrated into the PoT line, not just tacked on as an afterthought. We must move beyond our characterization of EPP as a "secondary and important task" and develop a positive approach to mass work that is consistent with



and will contribute to the development of the PoT line. While this integration will hardly be accomplished in the next six months, even initial steps in this direction will make important contributions to the BPC and the PoT line as party building forces.

EPP will help to consolidate the collective in a number of ways: it will integrate more of cadres' current political work into the collective, and build solidarity among cadres based on common work; it will develop cadres and leadership on the basis of more all-sided political practice; it will raise the consciousness of cadres and leadership around issues of race, class, and sex oppression, and create a context for struggle around these issues. The collective will also benefit from the focus EPP will give to the development of political lines, and from even the limited opportunities to test lines and practice the mass line. Finally, EPP can develop a basis for recruitment through demonstrated commitment and contribution to mass struggles.

EPP will also contribute to consolidating the PoT tendency nationally. It can provide a broader basis for outreach to organizations around the country; it can build faith in PoT forces as all-sided MLs, not just writers and researchers; and it can provide a broader basis for sharing experience with PoT forces: learning from those with more mass work experience, teaching those with less.

These diverse contributions the development of EPP can make to PoT lead us to consider the different forms of mass work our cadres could do on the basis of what is important about each form. In the context of consolidating a PoT collective, a starting point is integrating the mass work that cadres are currently involved in. Regarding new forms of mass work to be taken up, there were a number of criteria put forward: how they would help address internal problems, such as consciousness about sex, race, and class oppression; how they would enhance the ability of comrades to participate in the collective; how they could aid us in broadening our social base; how much the PoT line could contribute immediately to the struggle; and what a conjunctural analysis would identify as the most important struggles. Given our inexperience in this area, we agreed that there could be no hard and fast rule, but that each form of mass work would have to be evaluated individually. Priority would go to those forms which contributed most to the consolidation of the collective. After discussing the different benefits and drawbacks of high level and low level EPP work (that is, the degree of time and commitment assigned the EPP work), it was felt that low level EPP work would not develop a basis for sustained ties or significant recruitment, but could be useful in keeping some comrades at least minimally in touch with the mass movement. For EPP intended to broaden our social base--particularly in minority areas--two guidelines developed from the experience of comrades working in Chinatown were put forward. Called the "two sustaineds" they refer to sustained contact with minorities and mass organization members on a daily basis (not just weekly meetings), and sustained contact over time (demonstrated commitment and contribution to struggles over time, not just raids). These guidelines are important for building trust with minority activists and also for developing anti-racist consciousness among our cadre.



## Restructuring

At the retreat, the collective endorsed in broad outlines a radical restructuring of the organization. This new structure was designed to allow the collective to start work in its new directions of deepening and popularizing the line, developing a party building strategy, and linking EPP to the line. The new structure also reflected a number criticisms of the old structure:

- 1) The old exec was too small and overburdened with organizational responsibilities to provide broad and consistent political leadership.
- 2) The old division of labor, in which responsibilities were delegated to departments which each consisted of a cross-section of the collective, both failed to concentrate the the attention of the most advanced on the most important work and left the less advanced to flounder on tasks for which they were ill-prepared.
- 3) An ultra-democratic decision-making process placed cadre in the midst of discussions that could only make them feel uninformed and inadequate.
- 4) There were no provisions for developing cadres in areas in which they were less developed.
- 5) The relatively narrow scope of our work failed to utilize the broad range of skills and experience cadres already have.
- 6) Priorities for individual cadre and collective standards for participation were never specified.

There was general agreement around political priorities, the need for a greater division of labor, and the need to centralize key tasks. There were, however, concerns and reservations expressed as well. People were still skeptical that the problem of overwork would actually be overcome. It is still unclear how much of a division of labor is feasible, and requires great flexibility in setting a pace of work in the various committees and fractions to avoid overload. Related to this was whether it is realistic to expect exec members to be in EPP fractions. While it was recognized that EPP was not a priority for the exec as a whole, mass work could be a higher priority for some exec members than for others, in the interest of developing all-around leadership, maintaining continuity in current mass work, or raising consciousness about manifestations of oppression. A final concern was that increased centralization could lead to elitism. Given the weakness of the past exec in dealing with issues of uneven development and race, sex, and class oppression, there was the feeling that a larger exec with broader responsibilities would make it even harder to raise these issues. The only solution to this concern, of course, is actually to deal with these issues correctly.



Internal practices and attitudes

In the course of the retreat, a number of important and sensitive issues were raised and struggled over. Some struggles were consciously organized; others arose spontaneously. None were fully resolved, and more progress was made on some issues than on others. But all were important discussions, constituting a milestone in our treatment of those issues that have a direct and powerful impact on the participation of individual cadres and on the dynamics of the collective as a whole.

Uneven development. The presentation on uneven development emphasized its effects on individuals who are less developed theoretically and on their participation in the collective. The seriousness of this problem was dramatically demonstrated: people might leave the collective over this (indeed, one comrade has taken a leave of absence in part out of intimidation by participation in the collective), and we will always have trouble keeping less developed comrades in the absence of an effective approach to the problem.

In the first six months, less developed comrades felt emotionally frustrated, left behind, convinced that the gap between them and the more advanced was not closing but opening. Lack of confidence led to blaming themselves instead of expressing their valid frustrations. The effects of class, race, and sex oppression on their level of development were ignored, as were any skills and experiences other than theoretical/analytical ability.

Uneven development was seen to function on four levels: informational, conceptual, experiential and personal. Without a firm ML framework to work from, it was especially difficult for comrades to integrate new ideas and the effects of other levels of uneven development were intensified greatly. Collective discussions were particularly intimidating for less developed comrades. Innocent and thoughtful comments were easily misunderstood if not couched in the specific terminology of the ML movement. One never knew when a particular formulation would place her/him on the wrong side of a dispute over communist history about which s/he knew very little to start with. Participating in discussions became a risky business.

The presentation of uneven development clearly demonstrated that we must strive to make the collective a place where people with all skills and at all levels of development can feel comfortable, make important contributions and develop in all areas to the extent of their abilities. There were, however, real shortcomings in the discussion. First, there was no clear unity on exactly what was meant by overcoming uneven development. Although PoT forces had long ago broken with the notion of "every cadre a theorist," differences in understanding the degree and scope of evenness which was to be achieved continued to exist. Consequently, attention had been focused largely on theoretical uneven development while uneven development exists in all areas of our practice. One reason why theoretical uneven development was such a serious problem in the first six months was that skills in other areas were not a basis for contributions to the collective in that period. We have to develop many skills in our cadres. Nonetheless, broadening the focus of our work



thereby tapping comrades' other skills (in EPP etc.) is at best only a partial remedy for the effects of theoretical uneven development.

Second, the discussion of measures to combat uneven development was mechanical, having something of a laundry list effect. While all the suggestions were seen as helpful, no effort to evaluate them in terms of political priorities - i.e. what makes sense to adopt now?--was made, perhaps because this discussion came at the beginning of the retreat. While the discussion did provide an opportunity to bring important insights before the entire collective, it did not fully overcome the doubts of those most concerned with overcoming uneven development that the goal could be achieved.

Support, trust and commitment - The discussion of ways to improve the collective's internal life and to give more support to collective members, their spouses and close contacts etc. (See Internal consolidation section above), gave rise to struggle over the appropriate strategies for building solidarity among our cadre. It was readily agreed that common mass work would be an important source of mutual trust, and that getting to know each other socially would provide a basis for personal support in crises. There was considerable resistance, however, to a proposal that there be a planned social or cultural event every month to six weeks for collective members and those people politically and personally close to us. The ensuing struggle was both sharp and confused. While some comrades focused more narrowly on the specifics of the proposal, many participants responded out of more general concerns. These broader fears produced an emotional discussion that moved erratically, and often in a subterranean manner, between issues of personal support, mutual trust and political commitment. The spontaneous character of this discussion coupled with the complex emotions it evoked left virtually everyone unsatisfied. The failure of the collective to do a timely sum-up has perhaps been felt most strongly here as undefined and unarticulated differences have continued to affect the dynamics between collective members.

The retreat discussions did, however, succeed in opening up the general issue of the impact of collective life on individual needs. With proper follow-up it can be a catalyst for uniting around a correct understanding of the links between our organization and its members.

Consciousness of race, class and sexual oppression - The most explosive struggle of the retreat erupted spontaneously in the course of electing a new exec. The struggle focused on the concerns regarding the level of consciousness around issues of race, class and sexual oppression among leadership cadre. These concerns had previously been raised only cautiously and only in private; only the problem of racism had been raised in the collective and then not especially focused on leadership. The discussion was a highly emotional one: twice the meeting broke down in favor of private discussions that were needed to move things along. The struggle came to a head over two related issues: the concerns, especially of minority cadre and cadre of working class origin, that the leadership did not have a sufficient understanding of the effects of these oppressions on the one hand, and the fact that the Exec had received more criticism than support for its efforts and advances on these and other issues during the first six months. In the course of the struggle, a better understanding of the nature of the concerns was reached. The issues of uneven development and external political practice are related to class, race and sex, but these linkages had consistently been raised not by the Exec but by the rank and file. The lack of understanding of the depth and range of feelings and practices linked to class, race and sexual aspects of these issues and the failure to internalize sensitivity to these issues were strongly criticized. Thus the



importance and difficulty of building the trust necessary for the consolidation of the collective among cadres of different class and race backgrounds and locations had been seriously underestimated.

The results of the discussion were important and potentially very positive. The struggle moved the issue to a new level of clarification: a deeper understanding of the measure of distrust working class people, national minorities and women bring to communist organizations that are largely white, petty-bourgeois and male dominated was developed. It became increasingly clear that, especially for such cadre, trust can not be assumed, it has to be earned. Second the struggle laid a basis for resolving numerous personal bad feelings and moving forward on these issues. While those advancing the criticisms of the Exec acknowledged both the advances that had been made to date and the serious commitment of the Exec to continue to struggle to overcome deficiencies in practice and sensitivity, the Exec as a whole fully accepted the criticism for having played a passive rather than active role in struggling against the effects of class, race and sexual oppression in the collective and the various Exec members accepted the criticism of their individual "blindspots" in perceiving and dealing with the depth and range of these issues. Although no one saw the issue as resolved, all agreed that the basis for future principle struggle based on unity-struggle-unity was clearly present. Finally all cadre recognized the importance of our collective being able to press on to begin to resolve an issue that carried such a heavy emotional charge with it. The session was long and painful for the principals involved and upsetting for everyone, but one that has forced us to directly confront a serious and continuing problem in our practice.