

IF YOU DONT PLAY BALL, YOU DONT MAKE ERRORS

During the study-group period we have just completed, one of the main obstacles to further development and consolidation of our group has been that many people are taking a "wait-and-see" attitude. This attitude comes from many different sources, just as our group comes from many different political histories, but it can be broken down generally into a right and left form. The right error says, "let's not move too fast. We've seen other groups become dogmatist and sectarian, and we want to be absolutely sure we're not making any mistakes before we take even the first step." The left error says, "Nothing can be accomplished in a group this size, I'm suspicious of the other people because of their political pasts, I'll pick 6 or 7 people I agree with, unite immediately on 15 or 20 points, and start with that". What lies behind these views?

The right error grows out of a mystification of dogmatism which has its ideological basis in our inability to analyse dogmatism concretely, and its social basis in incomplete self-criticism by former dogmatists. The left error grows out of "revolutionary impatience" which wants an immediate solution without grasping the concrete problems in our group and struggling with them.

First I want to talk about the right error which comes out of a mystification of dogmatism. Some people view the process which made PL, RU, BACU, etc, turn onto the dogmatist path as an incomprehensible, dangerous boogie, the "natural tendency" of organizations of any kind, which creeps in unrecognizably. One fantasy I've had is that if I join an organization, I'll wake up three years later, selling the weekly Squawk outside some factory gate, with total amnesia. This is what I mean by a "mystification of dogmatism". We are afraid that if we move towards a democratic-centralist organization we will be helpless against this boogie, rather than realizing that dogmatism shows itself in concrete errors in theory and practice, which can be struggled against.

It is not surprising to find this fear in an organization which is united around anti-dogmatism, but hasn't analysed the content of what dogmatism is. If we understand only the symptoms of dogmatism, but not its historical and ideological roots, we won't be able to put a stop to the dogmatic tendencies which will inevitably arise in our organization, or even be able to recognize them. Without confidence that we could wage a successful struggle against dogmatic tendencies in a new organization, many people affiliated with our group will never actively participate in forming one. They'd rather "wait and see".

In our meetings, although we are on firm ground when we crack jokes about the outrageously bad style, or the organizational foibles of the dogmatists, we are still afraid to talk about their political ideas. We haven't talked about what is wrong with their lines on the trade unions, or the international situation, or the national question, or about how they swing from right to left errors, or about the history and isolation of our movement which allows mistakes like these to be the dominant line within it. The reason we don't

talk about these things is because that would mean we would have to start developing a line of our own. There are several reasons why we don't want to do that.

Many people are afraid to raise these questions because they think that we really don't agree on them, and that we are also incapable of dealing with the fact that we don't agree. People fear that suddenly we'll find out that we are no better than other politicians, just under the surface we are bitterly sectarian, unprincipled in debate, and likely to use low blows that leave everybody feeling bad.

Others are afraid to raise these questions because of the unequal development in the group. Those who may not know as much about all these questions are afraid to look stupid, while those who have studied a lot have probably experienced painful criticisms in the past about being too intellectual, too intimidating, men, etc. Needless to say, these fears, while based on real experiences we've all had, merely permit unequal development to continue on forever.

In addition, it would be a lot of work.

As a result of all these factors, we have been unable to get at the roots of our anti-dogmatism. It remains superficial; based on the dogmatists' errors in style and organization which are symptoms of more basic errors. Hand-in-hand with this problem goes our superficial understanding of those members of our group who have been in dogmatist organizations. The largest center of ex-dogmatists is the people who spent time in PL. (A correct analysis of these people is double important to us moving forward, because several of these people have become leaders in the new group due to hard work and organizational experience).

These people have offered a pretty thorough criticism of PL, but haven't summed up what their mistakes were which kept them in it. In response to questions I have asked, one common answer was that they ignored the lines emerging from the party center as much as possible, and that gave them more room to do what they wanted.

This, however, is not an excuse, it is merely evidence of another mistake. The reason to be in a democratic-centralist organization is not that you abstractly should be in one, (that is dogmatism and flunkeyism) but that a d.-c. organization strengthens your work and helps you contribute to an effort much larger than the sum of it's parts. If it is hindering you in the good aspects of your work, or helping you contribute to an effort which is going all the wrong direction, then it's not right to stay in it. If this was the case in PL, they should have used the available mechanisms of criticism, and if that didn't help, they should have left. (There are other people in our group who left PL earlier, or never joined, so this is not an abstract question. There are also people who, as independents, opposed former PLers in their mass work.)

I believe that this "answer" we've heard shows the necessity of a much more thorough self-criticism by the ex-PLers, and I think, to improve the ability of the whole group to move forward, that this should be publicly shared with the rest of us when they figure it out. Let me emphasize that self-criticism is necessary not because they have some moral flaw which has to be punished, (the rest of us were probably doing

some pretty crazy stuff in 1972) but because otherwise we can't move forward together.

(Incidentally, this whole problem gives a justification to the fear of the dogmatist "boogie" I mentioned before. Groups (BACU) have started before by claiming to be anti-dogmatist, and, guess what?! This is not because dogmatism is the inevitable result of M-L, democratic-centralist organizations, but because of an incomplete self-criticism and break with dogmatism. No wonder many people are hesitant about forming an organization, when they are not sure that dogmatism has been thoroughly rejected by some of the potential leaders.)

Now, for the independents. There is no "independent" center to compete with the ex-PL center, so I'll base what I say on my own experience. I'm sure other ex-independents will recognize some similar elements, although we come out of very different experiences. In my case, independence came through a combination of good and bad ideas. I rejected what the local dogmatists were doing mainly through common sense, but that was mixed up with large doses of anti-communism, anarcho-syndicalism, subjectivity (I thought that my personal development would culminate in a social revolution if I "liberated" myself enough) and other shady ideas. I thought communists were un-cool, and that they should do things that would be more popular with the other workers. (That's okay, as far as it goes, but it's hardly a guide for action). I had a pretty good analysis of what was wrong with their lines so far as they affected me personally (don't organize in the service sector, gays are decadent, hooray for the proletarian family) and I sometimes even read something about these debates. But I thought that forcing me to think about the national question, the international situation and party-building was one of the bad things about the dogmatists. I believed so much theory was unproletarian, and I'd rather get in there and struggle.

One important result of my "independent" ideological past, and I believe this applies to many of the "independents", is that I was relatively recently convinced of the need for Leninist organization. As a result of less history of struggle with these ideas, we tend to want to jump head-first into a democratic centralist organization without appreciating the struggle necessary to get on a firm ideological and organizational basis. Another problem is that we haven't found out yet how prone we are to making dogmatic errors. None of us, regardless of our class background, are very good at working collectively to use dialectical materialism in analysing our world and then using the results to guide our practice. We didn't exactly learn it in kindergarten. So we can all slip towards applying M-Lism in a mechanical way.

One example is the tendency among some ex-independents to say that this group is too big, we should get together with a few friends and start our own organization. I think this is a case of taking experiences from the formation of other (trend) organizations and applying them mechanically to San Francisco. The fact that we start out with 70-80 people, mostly based in trade union work, and agreeing with our preliminary points of unity, may not fit in with some people's preconceived ideas about how organizations start, but this is a unique situation in many respects, and properly grasped, the unique aspects of size and political development of our membership can be turned into a tremendous strength.

But this can only happen if we struggle in a principled way with the many obstacles we face. For example, telling a few friends informally that one is suspicious of the ex-PLers, and is therefore going to "wait-and-see" is not a principled way to deal with the problem. This only increases the inertia of the group, increases unspoken hostilities, and feeds your own "mystification of dogmatism" as a boogie that can't be struggled against.

The view that "I'll wait and see, and when this process folds I'll get together with a few friends and..." is also an example of "revolutionary impatience". Just as OL realized that there should be a party, and therefore declared itself one, this view realizes there should be a local organization on a firm ideological basis, and therefore is ready to declare one. Only principled struggle is going to bring a strong core and a stable organization out of our process. There is no short cut.

Along with this view goes an ultra-left line on splitting. "This group is too big and diverse. We can't get anywhere until we get rid of some of these people". Splits are a result of ideological struggle, and they should be minimized when they cannot be avoided. But they are not the cause of ideological unity, they are a side-effect of struggle, which is the only way to reach unity.

So the left view is ready to skip the struggle and jump to an organization, while the right view is afraid to start the struggle.

One last comment about the "wait and see" attitude, regardless of whether it comes from left or right sources. Far from being a way to avoid committing or recommitting dogmatist errors, it is itself a dogmatist error. People who are waiting for a good organization to either happen, or not happen, believe in Leninism as an abstract principle, but don't apply it to the world as a tool to help them struggle for what they want. They are waiting for someone to finally come along and tell them what to do, with an organization which is perfect in every respect. That will be a long wait, and the Second Coming may happen first. These people will never find a perfect organization, and they also don't want to help work on building one, so for them, Leninism is no more than an empty dogma.

We don't need more of this attitude on the left- we don't even need more PWOC flunkies. What we do need is to struggle for a good organization, with a good line and good practice. This means putting in time, commitment, and hard work. It doesn't mean thinking for three hours once a month. It does mean working to build collective units where we can struggle out conflicting ideas, do criticism and self-criticism, and build up the ability to guide our mass work with a revolutionary strategy. If we play ball, we will certainly make errors, but we may also make some hits.
