

INTRODUCTION TO PORTLAND YOUTH CLUB STATEMENT

By Don Hamerquist

I had notified the C.P. National Committee in October 1968 that I was resigning. I understood this as a resignation from Party membership as well as from the National Committee. This action was immediately discussed by the Oregon youth membership. The overwhelming majority supported me (my memory is something like 35 to 2) and informed the local C.P., where we still had good relations, that we were leaving the party.

A large group of us attended the Austin SDS NC during the Christmas 1968 break. By this time the Portland C.P. youth were organized in an independent framework and were operating as a local communist collective with no organizational ties to the C.P. In Austin we met with some C.P. comrades from around the country who argued for another attempt to 'take over' the C.P. at the upcoming 20th Convention. We weren't buying and parted with the understanding that we were definitively out of the party. It was a surprise a few weeks later when I received a demand from the National Committee to return to N.Y. for a "trial" to determine whether his month's earlier resignation from the National Committee would be "accepted" or if he would be expelled.

It was clear to all concerned at this time that I, and the vast majority of the Oregon youth section were no longer in the C.P. However, in an attempt to maintain some ties with people that were remaining in the Party, I went to N.Y. for the day-long National Committee expulsion process. The hearing ended with a N.C. vote of 52 to 48 to accept my resignation as the alternative to expulsion. The Hall leadership was worried that an expulsion would become an organizing issue at the convention and crafted a 'censure' statement to the overall party membership that followed the classic lines of such things – emphasizing violations of party procedure and discipline but evading all of the major differences over strategy and policy.

The document that responds to the letter to the membership was credited to the Portland Youth Club to allow some sympathetic comrades still in the C.P. a slight potential to distribute it. I doubt that any significant distribution happened, but I don't actually know one way or the other. The most important point is that by this time in early 1969, essentially all of the Oregon C.P. youth no longer saw themselves as members of the party; and the factional postures expressed in the earlier documents were their political viewpoint.

PORTLAND YOUTH CLUB
STATEMENT

1969?

We are responding to the open letter to the membership of the Party that details the charges of factional activity against Don Hamerquist - the charges which led to his censure by the National Committee. We respond for the following reasons: Hamerquist is a member of this club and this district; the activities and attitudes for which he has been censured are not his alone; the censure clearly implies a definite organizational and political direction for the Party. In our response we intend to deal with the political issues which underlie this attempted disciplinary action, not the action itself.

One thing should be clear from the outset. We are not raising any questions concerning the legitimacy and necessity of democratic centralism and revolutionary discipline in a vanguard party. What is at issue is the political character of this party - the U.S. Communist Party. Is it a revolutionary vanguard party, or is it a reformist and opportunist organization? Of course, it is true that a party cannot be revolutionary if it is not disciplined, but it is also true, and more relevant to the particular problem, that a party cannot be disciplined unless it is revolutionary - revolutionary in fact, not just in rhetoric. We will rest with Lenin on this point.

"And first of all the question arises: How is the discipline of the revolutionary party of the proletariat maintained? How is it tested: how is it reinforced? First, by the class consciousness of the proletarian vanguard and by its devotion to the revolution, by its perseverance, self-sacrifice, and heroism. Secondly, by its ability to link itself, to keep in close touch with and to a certain extent, if you like, to merge with the broadest masses of the toilers - primarily with the proletarian, but also with the non-proletarian toiling masses. Thirdly, by the correctness of the political leadership exercised by this vanguard and of its political strategy and tactics, provided that the broadest masses have been convinced by their own experiences that they are correct. Without these conditions, discipline in a revolutionary party that is really capable of being a party of the advanced class, whose mission it is to overthrow the bourgeoisie and transform the whole of society, cannot be achieved. Without these conditions, all attempts end in phrasemongering and grimacing. On the other hand, these conditions cannot arise all at once. They are created only by prolonged effort and hard-won experience. Their creation is facilitated by correct revolutionary theory, which, in its turn, is not a dogma, but assumes final shape only in close connection with the practical activity of a truly mass and truly revolutionary movement."

(Left-Wing Communism)

The primary question is this. Can the U.S. Communist Party become a "revolutionary party that is really capable of being a party of the advanced class whose mission it is to overthrow the bourgeoisie and transform the whole of society?" Our conclusion is that it is not presently such a party, and that, in fact, it has become a social democratic sect which can neither demand nor enforce democratic centralism, or any approximation to it or facsimile of it.

We are in the Communist Party because of our appreciation of the need for a revolutionary Marxist Leninist vanguard party. But the same conditions which have made us increasingly aware of the necessity for such a party, make us increasingly aware of the failure of the Communist Party to fulfill this role. At the same time as the development of mass movements and struggles have made a revolutionary party both more necessary and more possible, the obstacles to changing the Communist Party in that direction have grown as well. The time for revolutionizing the Communist Party is rapidly running out. If major changes in policy and leadership are not made at the April Convention, it will be impossible for members of the Communist Party to work like communists.

Our position in this situation is very clear. We will abide by the standards of democratic centralism if the April Convention clearly and categorically repudiates the reformist and opportunist essence of the political practice for which the national leadership of the Party is collectively responsible. Without such an about-face, these standards will be utopian. It is ludicrous for such a party, and a party that is isolated as a party from all of the meaningful centers of struggle, to attempt to impose revolutionary discipline. We refuse to take it seriously, and will take the actions and consequences which follow from this refusal.

It isn't possible to deal adequately with the political practice of the Party over the past few years in this brief response. Though that is certainly a necessary job if all of the proper lessons are to be drawn, it is not essential to support the characterization of the Party as essentially reformist and opportunist. This can be done through pointing out - not the mistakes in what the Party has said and done, though these are readily apparent in the approach towards the Black Liberation movement and the Democratic Party, for example - but the vital functions of a revolutionary vanguard which it has not performed. It is what the Party has failed to do and say, its errors of "ommission" which are crucial. It has not been the Party which has "raised the property question" in the struggles for more limited goals. It has not been the Party which has represented the interests of the whole class, the interests of the future, in the movements of sections of the class for their immediate interests. It has not been the Party which has pointed out the "necessity of what is" in the movements for changing what is. In no policy area has the Party consistently performed these vital functions, and to fail to perform them is a result of and evidence for reformism and opportunism - as well as the major cause of the Party's growing isolation from the center of struggle.

What we want to deal with is the operative theory which underlies the political practice. We are not very concerned with what is said about Marxism in isolation from real activity. We are concerned with the way in which the Party applies Marxism to the current political situation in order to develop a strategic approach. There are two related aspects of this operative theory which we think are of decisive importance in setting the Party's approach to the international and domestic class struggle. The first is "peaceful coexistence". The second is the "democratic" struggle to "curb" monopoly. These features manifest themselves in the effective actions of the Party more clearly than they can be seen in any program or policy statement, but there is no difficulty in finding them in the latter as well.

The concept of peaceful coexistence is at the heart of the U.S. Party's approach to the international struggle and to its internationalist responsibilities. That is beyond debate. The basis of this concept is the argument that the relative strength of the forces arrayed against imperialism is growing, and is increasingly the major factor determining the form and content of the international struggle. From this correct estimate the conclusion is drawn that this strength can and should be directed to force imperialism to give up its imperialist positions, prerogatives, and designs without resorting to military force to extend and defend them. That is, the power of the anti-imperialist movements can force imperialism, specifically U.S. imperialism, to forego preparation for global war and accept disarmament, to accept the permanence of socialism and the necessity of coexistence with the socialist states, to accept the peaceful national liberation of colonial peoples and their opting for the path of socialist construction, to forego the violent use of state power in the democratic and class struggle within the imperialist state. Quite a list of possibilities. In other words, the argument is that the growing relative strength of the anti-imperialist forces can and should be directed towards the stabilization and normalization of the class struggle in relatively peaceful forms, forms where the struggle becomes more a "competition" and less a class war.

The basic source of error in the idea of peaceful coexistence that is manifested in a number of different ways is the social democratic conception of imperialism. It is one thing to say that the ability of imperialism to use military force to maintain itself is diminishing - that the possibilities of militarily defeating it are increasing. It is another thing to draw any necessary conclusions from this about the form of the international struggle. In fact, the very period in which peaceful coexistence is supposed to have become realizable, has been marked by increasing reliance on the use and threat of the use of military force by imperialism. While the development of military technology makes it irrational for the capitalist class to hope to benefit from a global nuclear war, they certainly can hope to benefit and do benefit, from the threat of such a war, from the preparations for such a war, from a variety of localized military and para-military adventures, and from the military suppression of challenges to their dominance whenever and wherever they may arise. On both empirical and theoretical grounds it seems more likely that the weakening relative position of imperialism will increase, not decrease, the possibility of military confrontations and conflicts below the global level. To assume that a preponderance of anti-imperialist strength can force a policy of "peace" on imperialism can only be justified if it is also held that the policy of war, of imperialism, is just that - a "policy". This, of course, is the classical social democratic conception of imperialism - a "policy", not a "stage" of capitalism.

Even more important, unless the social democratic position that capitalism has a viable alternative to the policies of imperialism - policies in which war and the threat of war are vital elements - is accepted, the struggle for peace must become the struggle against the source of the danger of war, against state monopoly capitalism, that is imperialism. Any idea that this struggle can be stabilized or normalized short of the destruction of imperialism is an utopian illusion. Only a social democrat who is willing to argue that there is a "progressive", "rational", "non-imperialist" section of the ruling class can hold such a position, with its corollary that the international struggle should be channeled into approaches which support this section of the ruling class.

To pose peaceful coexistence as a priority distinct from the defeat of imperialism entails opportunism, and to pose it in any other way makes it meaningless. Inevitably, stabilizing and normalizing the international struggle becomes the goal, the reciprocity implied in the notion of "coexistence" leads to the subordination of the struggle to overthrow imperialism to the struggle to maintain "peace". Then the sharpest confrontations in the international struggle are seen as diversions or provocations, not as the areas for the maximum application of anti-imperialist power. The only permissible position for a revolutionary party is that the growing strength of the anti-imperialist forces must be directed to broadening and intensifying the international class struggle. The existence of capitalism must be challenged on all fronts and through all forms of struggle, and when you are genuinely challenging the existence of a social system, the idea of "coexistence" with it becomes a contradiction. At best, the concept of peaceful coexistence is an unnecessary confusion of the international responsibilities of revolutionaries, at worst it is a complete evasion of these responsibilities.

Just as there is no argument that the international approach of the Party revolves around the notion of peaceful coexistence, there is no argument but that its approach to attaining socialism in this country revolves around the notion of a peaceful parliamentary "democratic" struggle within the framework of the "anti-monopoly coalition". Peaceful, parliamentary and "democratic" as they are used in this perspective are related bits of opportunism and reformism that have almost nothing to do with the realities of the struggles taking place in this country. Let us deal with them one by one.

Struggles for relatively minor reforms in this country have tended to involve the most brutal and violent kind of suppression. This would seem to be persuasive evidence that the struggle for state power will not be peaceful. The classical conditions outlined by Marx for the possibility of a peaceful transition to socialism - the absence of a standing army and of a large governmental bureaucracy - certainly do not apply to this country. So what is the justification for treating the possibility of peaceful transition in this country, not as a possibility so remote that it must be disregarded by practical revolutionaries, but as a probability? When the search for a reasonable explanation for the elevation of peaceful transition from a remote possibility - a historical accident - to a real probability, is pressed, the only tangible argument that is offered is the same shift in the international balance of forces which provided a pseudo-justification of peaceful coexistence. But this does not follow any more than did the former. Any presumption that the lack of success of the U.S. ruling class in the international "competition", in itself, would induce it to give up its control of the state without a violent struggle is utopian. This would only follow if it were clear that the international anti-capitalist forces were prepared to intervene militarily in this country. In most circumstances that would be a mistake, not to mention that it seems to be absolutely precluded by the usual presentation of peaceful coexistence.

The practical implications of this emphasis on the peaceful transition to socialism are extremely important. If the revolutionary movement waits for the conditions in which a peaceful transition is probable, it will wait indefinitely; and, if it bases its present activities on the possibility of a peaceful transition, it will be unable to develop the mass political, organizational and ideological basis for the violent seizure of state power which the overwhelming weight of evidence and logic indicates will be necessary.

dating indicated

Once the peaceful perspective is given such emphasis, it is quite consistent to place overwhelming priority on legal struggle, and in particular on parliamentary forms of legal struggle. It is clear that all struggles for state power that have been permanently or temporarily successful, however, have subordinated the parliamentary struggle to the overall struggle for the development of institutions of dual power that challenge the entire capitalist superstructure - and extra-legal or semi-legal forms of struggle have been the most important. While it might be argued that this was because of the rudimentary development of parliamentary institutions in those countries, the recent experiences in France, the classical parliamentary democracy, make clear the disastrous consequences of being tied to an emphasis on parliamentary struggle.

In the strategic perspective of the U.S. Party, the main focus of the class struggle is the attempt to form an anti-monopoly coalition in the form of a parliamentary political party led by its working class component. This party then contests for government control on a "democratic" program of "curbing monopoly power". All other forms of struggle and organization are developed in relation to this basic parliamentary focus. This is a clear revision of the Leninist conception of parliamentary struggle as an arena in which to expose the realities of class power - the essential dictatorship of the bourgeoisie behind the facade of parliamentary democracy. Instead, the parliamentary institutions appear to provide the necessary framework for the struggle for power. This is no abstract theoretical point. The Party approach, in effect, would transpose the parliamentary reformism of European social democracy - itself demonstrably reactionary and a prop for capitalism - onto conditions in this country where it would buttress popular parliamentary illusions and popular anti-parliamentary cynicism at the same time. Not that such a parliamentary formation might not serve a valuable function. It could do this, and so can parliamentary approaches generally. But this can only happen if they are always subordinate to the overall challenge to the institutional framework of capitalism of which the parliamentary institutions are an important part. Again, a functionally social democratic idea is at the root of the position. This time it is the inability to see the class nature of the parliamentary framework and its functional role in supporting the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.

The clearest and most important capitalation to social democratic reformism lies in the Party's conception of "democratic" struggle. In 1907, comparing the U.S. to Russia in an introduction to Marx and Engels' Letters To Americans, Lenin remarked that the two main features of the U.S. situation that were not relevant to Russia were "...the absence of any big nationwide democratic problems whatsoever facing the proletariat; (and) the complete subjection of the proletariat to bourgeois politics". Clearly, the reference to "democratic" problems means those issues to which there were solutions within the framework of capitalism. The implication of the remark was that in this country, the priority should be on developing the political, organizational, and ideological independence of the working class. It was true then and it is even more true now.

The U.S. Party, however, has discovered a contemporary nationwide "democratic" problem whose solution is a precondition for the development of a meaningful struggle for state power. This is the "curbing of monopoly", whose attainment is the historic task of a cross-class anti-monopoly coalition, whose level of consciousness is not yet socialist and revolutionary. That is, it is proposed as the task of a coalition in which the proletariat is not yet conscious of itself and is, therefore, still in "subjection to bourgeois politics". There are all kinds of things wrong with this perspective. If measures to curb monopoly are not also anti-capitalist in content, they are historically reactionary - they are in contradiction to Marx's position that the proletariat favors all trends which centralize the bourgeoisie. The idea of a multi-class coalition is extremely confused. The fact is that the working class will be the overwhelming weight of any such coalition. The real problem will be unifying various sections of the class - developing class consciousness and class autonomy, not allying with politically and numerically insignificant sections of the non-monopoly bourgeoisie and the independent petty bourgeoisie. In practice this approach to coalition with its exaggerated emphasis on the multi-class character of the coalition, leads to the acceptance of leadership from the liberal section of the monopoly bourgeoisie who are willing to make concessions to divert and divide popular reform movements. This is not the path to ending the subjection of the proletariat to bourgeois politics.

There are two other things wrong with this perspective. It distorts the priorities for revolutionaries so that the development of a mass revolutionary working class movement is subordinated to a series of reform objectives.

"In practice, the proletariat will be able to retain (and attain) independence only if it subordinates its struggle for all the democratic demands...to its revolutionary struggle for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie." (Lenin)

If the proletariat must subordinate democratic struggles, certainly its class conscious vanguard must also have such a priority.

In fact, curbing monopoly is not a democratic goal in any meaningful sense. It is either an objectively reactionary populist slogan, or it is a socialist measure which will immediately bring the class nature of the state into issue. This doesn't mean that reforms cannot be won from monopoly capital, that would be absurd. It means that there is no collection of such reforms such that, once attained, one could say, "monopoly is curbed, but capitalism remains." Monopoly and all that it implies and entails is no accidental form of capitalism, it is contemporary capitalism and it is irreversible - just as is its international extension, imperialism. Those popular demands that involve a meaningful challenge to monopoly capital are only superficially "democratic". To say that they are democratic is only to say that many of their supporters have illusions about the social conditions for their attainment. They don't realize that their demands will not be met in substance short of a social revolution. But revolutionaries have no vested interest in promoting illusions about the flexibility of the system they are out to destroy. They must expose reformist illusions as illusions, not project them as the ideological basis for a super democratic reform coalition. The task of a revolutionary in all popular reform movements is to attempt to develop within them the understanding of the class essence of property relations and political power, the consciousness of the necessity and possibility of a revolution. To fail to do this entails a reformist approach, and the core of the Party's strategic perspective revolves around a prior justification for such a failure - the arbitrary separation of a stage of democratic struggle from the struggle for state power.

The preceding points are the basis of our conception of the revisionist core of the Party's operative theory. It is not a Marxist Leninist framework, but a social democratic one. It is a unity of revisionist theory and reformist practice in which each depends on and supports the other.

We would like to make one final point. Criticism of the Communist Party in this country has always been opportune and thus it has often been opportunist - or just mistaken - even when it comes from the left. In fact, the opportunism and eclecticism of many of the left critics of the Party provides a convenient cover, and in a sense a kind of justification, for the policies and approaches of the opportunists in the leadership of the Party. To use a convenient example; an organization* which only last month came to the appreciation of the need for a mass line; which only a few months ago began to appreciate the relationship between main and secondary contradictions in capitalism; which has recognized the strategic importance of the working class for less than a year; which didn't see the relationship between imperialism and capitalism and freedom and democracy until just a few short years ago; has not provided the best possible platform for a coherent criticism of the Communist Party.

We want to disassociate our criticisms of the Party from many criticisms which are current in the left in this country and which bear a certain similarity to ours. We disagree with any criticisms of the Party which diminish in any way the need for a disciplined centralized Marxist-Leninist vanguard organization in favor of exemplary actions, revolutionary demands, armed tactics, focus, or any other panaceas. We disagree with any criticisms of the Party which diminish in any way the necessity for a mass line - for relating to, and articulating the needs of the people, for struggling for reform objectives. We disagree with any criticism of the Party which implies in any way that the reason why a revolutionary movement hasn't developed in this country is because this or that sect's version of Marxist "truth" hasn't gained hegemony in the left. Finally, we disagree with any criticisms of the Party which do not cope with the real problems of developing a revolutionary movement in the dominant capitalist country, and which fail to appreciate the contributions as well as the failures of the Party.

- collectively -

PORTLAND YOUTH CLUBS

* (American SDS - Austin Texas Convention)