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FORWARD MOTION

A Marxist Newsletter
organized by the
Proletarian Unity League

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December, 1981

Dear Friend,

You have here the first edition of what we plan to be a regular newsletter from the Proletarian Unity League.

Month by month, more people want to fight the new Right-wing in this country, while popular concern for the threat of world war grows even faster. All sections of the Left feel tremendous pressures to find roads to the unified, clear-sighted political leadership the U.S. people want. Activists are searching for practical experience that brings new ideas and serious thinking that helps their work. Many activists have been discouraged by the direction taken by various communist organizations over the last decade and the greatly weakened state the communist Left finds itself in today. Nonetheless our own travels and correspondence have convinced us there are many people out there who feel reinvigorated by today's political challenges. From a realization that people still need Marxism in the struggle, and need it more than ever, comes a determination to keep going.

This newsletter can be another small contribution to filling the gaps in Marxist political discussion today. It is a project with limited ambitions, but with it, we want to let people know that we are still here and that many other like-minded Marxist activists are still here. We want to give people interested in what we are thinking about and doing a better chance to participate in our political discussions. We also want to offer a forum for others who may want to share their own work and ideas.

The articles in this first number are typical of what we plan to include. Our emphasis will be on political work and discussion. Some articles, like the municipal hospital strike sum-up, will explore issues in organizing work today. Circulated in another form, this article has already provoked debate, and the next newsletter will carry the conclusion of the article plus a critical comment. Other articles will address topical issues. Like the nuclear disarmament broadside included here, these will try to answer by example what kind of politics Marxist activists should bring to today's progressive struggles. We will also run theoretical articles, like this issue's review of the wave of opposition to the thesis that capitalism has been restored in the Soviet Union. This issue also includes excerpts from work by PUL's Nationalities Commission on the building of the Black United Front today. (A complete copy of "Preliminary Views on Revolutionary Work in the Afro-American People's Liberation Movement" in draft is available for \$3.00. The authors would like comments.)

Rounding out the newsletters will be explanations about PUL or its activities. This will give people who are or have been interested in working with us a chance to see what we do. To start off, we offer a few words of self-explanation in response to commonly asked questions about the PUL.

Simply stated, our goal in selecting articles will be to help organizers develop their work and their strategic thinking. We hope all will be appropriate for study or discussion. Some may be useful for wider distribution. (The "Nuclear Blackmail" article originally was issued as a leaflet, for example). Please feel free to reproduce and use individual items.

Starting this newsletter is something of an experiment for us, and we hope it works. For this, we are counting on your participation. We do not have all the answers by any means. But our premise is that giving ourselves the chance to exchange views with friends around the country and giving you the same opportunity can help all our work. Some of the articles in this issue were provided by friends, and we hope other people will send along articles of the sort here. Letters are also welcome. We cannot promise you the widest of audiences, but you can be sure that articles here will reach people who are serious activists and Marxist-oriented.

This newsletter costs money to prepare and mail out. PUL has sunk some money into it to start it off, but eventually it will have to pay for itself. If you like this first issue, a contribution (sent to ULP, with a note it is for the newsletter) would be a big vote of confidence to our team working on it. Of course, if you do not want to receive this any more, let us know and we will remove your name from our list. But we hope you will like this newsletter and even send us names of others to whom you would like it sent. Either way, we hope you will take a look at what we have done. We are looking forward to hearing from you.

— the Newsletter Committee
PUL

The Proletarian Unity League: Where We Came From, What We Look Like, What We Do

Where We Came From

The Proletarian Unity League had its original roots in one of the several big changes on the Left which followed the wave of mass political struggles of the 1960's. In the early 1970's revolutionary tendencies in the Black, Chicano, and other national movements strengthened themselves, including the formation of major communist groups like the Black Workers Congress, the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization, I Wor Kuen, and the August Twenty-Ninth Movement. The left, socialist-feminist wing of the women's movement also grew, spurring the formation of women's unions and other projects around the country. At that time, the white student movement also gave way to several tendencies, including democratic socialism, anti-imperialist currents, populist-style community organizing, academic Marxism and Marxist-Leninist local organizing in collectives. The Revolutionary Youth Movement II grouping within Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) gave birth to a number of such local collectives. Like the early October League, Bay Area Revolutionary Union, and Sojourner Truth Organization, the PUL arose ideologically from that experience.

These collectives shared two things in common. First, in an uneven way, they carried forward the struggle within SDS against the Progressive Labor Party line, particularly its social chauvinist attacks on socialist countries and national liberation struggles abroad and on the struggles of the oppressed nationalities at home. Second, these collectives expressed a practical commitment to working class organizing: they recognized the revolutionary mission of the working class and sought to bring a Marxist perspective to its struggles. At the same time, struggle continued within this section of the movement between those who saw the central importance of constructing a new Marxist-Leninist vanguard party and more anarcho-syndicalist perspectives.

We began to build a small group in the mid-1970's. When it formed, the PUL was

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relatively inexperienced, organizationally weak, and all white. Its members were mainly from petit-bourgeois, ex-student backgrounds, with experience in the anti-war, student, women's and (to a lesser extent) trade union movements. The group grew and consolidated itself over the next few years through a process of merger of several small collectives.

PUL did not start out with anything approaching a complete statement of unity. When it first formed, the group had not settled all the major questions of building a socialist movement in this country, or even all the most important ones. The people involved had a certain degree of ideological unity around Marxism-Leninism; wanted to carry out disciplined communist work and study; and, over time, applied Marxist study and summed up enough direct and indirect experience to reach a few basic conclusions about the current state of the U.S. revolution. Our early members did a fair amount of investigation of other organizations existing at the time, and because those which they knew anything about did not share the same conclusions, they decided to form a group, elect leadership, and develop work among the masses, while still investigating and trying to unify with other Marxist-Leninist organizations.

Three early conclusions stand out. First, that the central strategic task of U.S. revolutionaries was to build a new communist party. We don't think PUL had then, or has had since, a narrow interpretation of the work involved in that task. Second, that the approaches to building a new party adopted by the largest and best organized Marxist-Leninist groups at that time had serious flaws. PUL members thought those flaws were in some way tied to those groups' willingness to make declarations about their vanguard status without measuring their work against any objective criteria, and without setting out any coherent strategy and tactics for those problems facing the working class and national movements which preceding Marxist movements had failed to resolve. Third, the early PUL held that the struggle against white supremacist national oppression was central to uniting the working class, merging the struggles of the workers and national revolutionary movements, and mobilizing other mass movements and all popular forces to fight the ruling class in this country. This white-supremacist national oppression has as its reverse side a system of preferences for whites, which extends into every feature of U.S. economic, political and cultural life.

The combination of these three points separated PUL to some degree from other Marxist-Leninist organizations, and made the prospects for unity with them less immediate. Among the organizations which held that party-building was the central task, some had declared or were on the verge of declaring themselves the new Party (the CLP, the RU), while others acted like they had resolved all the important questions and opposed PUL's very tentative perspectives around national oppression.

Although PUL got started with very limited ties to the working class and oppressed nationality masses, its early members all recognized the necessity for communists to sink firm roots in the struggles of the U.S. people. This meant investigating and beginning to take up the actual problems of the trade union, Black liberation and other national movements, and the women's emancipation and other

mass movements. Members went to work where they would be able to help organize those struggles.

As part of our commitment to Marxist-Leninist unity, we set about analyzing the situation in the communist movement as a whole. The premature declarations of Parties in that period had a lot to do with the importance we attached to this project, and we were quickly led to look at Marxists' confrontations with ultra-leftism throughout the history of the international workers movement. In addition, as soon as our mass work began to take shape, we found ourselves wrestling with the characteristic weaknesses and errors that afflicted communist work throughout the 1970's. The organization's early years were characterized by debate about whether ultra-leftism was the main danger to our work and to that of the communist movement as a whole. Since we did not originally form around a hard and fast ideological unity, as our work developed different orientations emerged: in particular, a more ultra-left perspective on our tasks, and another perspective which more accurately characterized the main problems in the communist movement and in our own group as deriving from ultra-leftism. This perspective (referred to in our first publication, on busing, in September 1975) developed into the analysis found in the book *Two, Three, Many Parties of a New Type?* From late 1975 and throughout 1976, the PUL consolidated ideologically and organizationally around the character of the main danger to Marxist-Leninist work, our party-building perspective, and the implications of the struggle against ultra-leftism for work in the mass movements. This included our effort to put our analysis of ultra-leftism before the rest of the communist movement.

What We Look Like and What We Do

Since our origin, we have established ourselves in a number of areas of work, grown slowly but steadily, expanded geographically a bit, developed our political perspectives on new problems, and built a relatively stable organization. We are continuing to grow, though still not by leaps and bounds. We have improved our national and class composition and our political ties to the Black liberation struggle; nevertheless we still cannot consider ourselves by any means a thoroughly multinational or working class organization in composition. Our sexual composition is and has always been roughly half and half. Our work in the mass movements has expanded quite a bit, and in a few places we have begun to sink strong roots in the people's struggle.

In keeping with communists' long-term objectives, our trade union work has focused on larger, organized factories, but we have not made this an absolute. We have tried to balance it off against the need to work in situations reflective of the multinational reality of the U.S. working class, and in situations more favorable to political struggle for consistent democracy for oppressed nationalities and women. For this reason in particular, we have worked in other kinds of workplaces and joined in some union organizing drives. We have done rank and file organizing in electrical equipment, auto, hospitals, light electrical, and in the public sector

(including citywide battles over lay-offs, access to and level of services, etc.) In these workplaces, we have participated in union committees (including organizing committees), caucuses and other forms of rank and file organization. We have been involved in union elections at the local and national level. Our members have held various levels of union office. In our trade union work we have struggled against adventurist tendencies and learned some lessons in practicing united front tactics to build class struggle unions. We have also learned the strengths of Left initiative, rank and file mobilization and organization. In addition we have struggled against tendencies toward simple trade unionism in communist work, tendencies which in particular downplay the working class' struggle against white-supremacist national oppression.

While trade union work has been and continues to be the backbone of the organization's political practice, our work has broadened over the past five or so years. While we have only made modest advances from our all-white beginnings, we have struggled for the view that multinational unity among communists and in the people's struggle is a political question, not simply an organizational one. So far we have done work in the left wing of the Black movement nationally and local organizing in the Black community. We also work in the women's movement, community organizing and city-wide politics (including some electoral efforts and anti-repression struggles), the gay rights movement, and some anti-imperialist work.

We have had fairly regular group agitation in the form of leaflets, and we have discussion circles and study groups of various types going on. In our work among the masses, we have spent a lot of time trying to put before the politically active workers and other people the communist world view, to engage them in the use of Marxism in daily struggles, and to interest them in communist organization. At the same time, we know from our own experience that you cannot separate talking about Marxism from the immediate economic and political problems which the working class and the people as a whole face day-to-day. Our success in this type of propaganda work has been uneven — in some places, fairly successful; in others, hardly at all. Finally, we have always devoted a portion of our limited resources to work with other revolutionaries — to correspondence and travel and so on.

Our group has paid a lot of attention to training its members. Sometimes this has meant slower growth than we would have liked, but we believe it's been worth it. Our recruitment policy, while grounding new members in the group's line and developing their practical grasp of it, also places a big emphasis on training people for the long haul, on preparing them for difficult situations, and on building up their enthusiasm for making a life of this type of work. A key feature of this training has been to cultivate a willingness to work together, to reject the attitude that "as soon as things don't go my way, I'll take my bat and ball and go home." We've tried to instill that spirit, to stress how important revolutionary organization is to getting anything done in the class struggle.

The PUL has weathered a number of internal struggles since its early days, including some around ultra-leftism, white chauvinism and features of the national question, around democratic centralism (particularly ultra-democracy and liquidationism), around party-building, and others. At the same time, it has never been necessary to reverse the overall direction the group was heading in, and we have never had split. We have had to deal, of course, with a certain amount of demoralization at times and with disaffected individuals, but our major line struggles have led to greater unity.

For one thing, we have always taken the revolutionary unity of our organization (and of the communist Left as a whole) very seriously; we have built it up slowly and with great care. We likewise train ourselves to take splits equally seriously and to recognize the heavy responsibility borne — even where a split is absolutely necessary — by those who take that path in a revolutionary organization. We have generally emphasized in our recruitment policy and throughout our group as a whole that organizational unity can only be maintained around a unified line, one based in Marxist principle. And we have taken to heart that this unity can only be achieved through a process of starting from our common unity and collectively struggling through to a new unity — through practice of the mass line internally and externally and through systematic criticism and self-criticism of our work.

* * * *

Since starting out, we have formulated some clear ideas about the struggle in this country and the world and what activists need to do to build a movement for socialism. We have been and still are a small group. We try not to have illusions and know no small group can get very far on its own. We want to find ways to work together with whomever we can in what is already shaping up to be a time of tremendous challenge in the people's struggle.

DOONESBURY



Sum-Up of a Strike in a Municipal Hospital

Getting Out From Between A Rock and a Hard Place

A recent strike at a municipal hospital points to both the problems and direction public sector unions will be facing in the 1980's. The history of public sector unionism is decades behind industrial unionism. In most states, it is still illegal for public workers to strike, while the political machines often control the workforce, effectively undermining trade union solidarity. Even with these conditions, the strike at this public hospital made some breakthroughs. And even though some backroom dealing by the leadership of another union left us in a weaker position, we also saw that labor solidarity is possible. While the illegality of striking made city workers afraid of striking, the success and eventual amnesty won in the SEIU strike touched off a rash of walkouts and strikes in other areas of the city. Our victory in winning lay-off language, our ability to keep the majority of our membership out on strike, our flexibility in tactics, and the support we got from other hospital union members demonstrated what trade union militancy and solidarity could win us!

There are many lessons for active union members to learn from this strike; lessons of organization and leadership. While conditions are forcing public workers and public unions into the forefront of labor activity, much of the organization and class solidarity we will need is yet to be built. And in the face of tax reform measures like Proposition 13 in California, Proposition 2-1/2 in Massachusetts, and federal budget cuts in funds for social services, we will find ourselves fighting for our very jobs... facing wage freezes, lay-offs, and drastic cuts in benefits. As these measures take effect, we face the prospect that unions will fight for their own survival, but will not fight together. Issues such as tax reform, patronage, affirmative action and continued delivery of services will be before us as broader political debates. From our strike we can draw some of the lessons we'll need to face these times and conditions.

The Need to Organize

This municipal hospital strike showed the importance of collective and democratic organization of the rank and file. Without this involvement and democratic discussion, the more left leaders of the union would find themselves locked in ineffective debate with the center union leadership. Key to making headway with the leadership, and in running the strike was the setting up of organization and committees that were responsible for the activities of the rest of the membership. It was this base and structure that gave our views credibility; it was this base and structure that kept the strike going after day-1.

From the beginning of negotiations, the issue of democracy and rank and file involvement met with resistance from the union staff and president. In many ways, members were seen as the troops in a battle that the leadership was designing. As activists in the local, we did not gasp the depth of this opposition to democratic discussion immediately; that it represented different views of what a union should and must be. Because of this unclarity, we did not always try and build up rank and file organization with its own views. An obvious example is the fact that while the union staff had a strategy for the negotiations (which depended extensively on a legal case that few members knew about), union members had no alternative strategy for negotiations. In fact, the local president was able to stifle any strategy discussions on the negotiating committee or the Contract Action Committee (CAC) up until the last several weeks of the contract. We did not agree among ourselves where we should be heading; the activists were not prepared to make important decisions. Most importantly, we were not able to organize sentiment behind us for a particular tactic or proposal. The union leadership was still able to call all the shots.

It was at this point that sentiment for striking began to surface, and we took this sentiment and organized broadly with it. We took it out to the membership, organizing new activists to visit members department by department. And because of this approach, we built up support to the point that the president and the union staff realized that we might strike, with or without them. Once the president backed down and agreed to allow the strike, our work took on a new character. We had built up an organized group of activists who were agitating hospital-wide for a strike; we now broke that group up into committees that would become responsible for running the strike. Picket captains, media work, news bulletins, were all assigned to various workers, and coordinated by the strike coordinating committee. It was this organization that gave us real strength and independence in the strike. As the president once mumbled, we just ran ourselves. But more importantly, these committees actually became the site where major political questions were decided for the strike. If we had understood that sooner, we would have had the committees working weeks (instead of days) before actual walkout. We would have been able to convince people about the importance of various types of work, so that we didn't just keep reacting to the pressures of the moment. It was from this organization that we ran an effective strike: that allowed us to make independent decisions as well as

giving leadership responsibilities to new faces who had never appeared interested in the union before. It was because of this organization that we came out of the strike known as some of the most militant city workers around town.



Exposing Right Opportunism

During the pre-strike period and the strike itself, union activists discovered a lot about working with the social-democratic staff of SEIU. This staff is probably one of the most progressive in the state. They actively opposed regressive tax measures and the Mayor's patronage system. They are committed to organizing the unorganized, and won the first seniority language ever for city workers. But while working alongside the union on these issues, we found ourselves in constant conflict with the president and his staff. Our disagreements arose over issues such as

militancy of actions, the amount of democracy in the local, affirmative action and discrimination, and over the type of outreach and coalitions we were trying to build.

The president's first concern was to maintain control and influence over the local. He is interested in little else, except broadening his control and influence. So when proposals such as the Contract Education Committee were made 8 months before contract expiration, he flatly opposed it because he was afraid we would try to build up an active base to influence negotiations. It took a petition of 400 members to the Executive Board to make him back down. And then, a month later, the City negotiations opened early! The president opposed the committee because he is content to use members as shock troops. He sees conflict between labor and management, not as class struggle, but as struggle between various politicians. His clout in the battle becomes his ability to mobilize members to stand behind him (just as the Mayor's power lies in his machine). In short, the president's interest is not in organizing workers as a class to defend their own interests, but as a base that he depends on for his (and the local's) power.

We saw this in how negotiations were run. We democratically elected negotiators, suggested contract language, but were kept out of any of the real negotiating. That is, we wrote up none of the actual language, all newsletters were written by staff members and we sat 'behind' the table as the president and staff negotiated the contract. In fact, even the negotiators never were involved in discussions that lead to language changes, or strategy discussions (until our negotiators from the hospital forced the issue). The president left those discussions and decisions to the staff (who he hires) and himself.

Another example of this 'politician' view of labor struggle was the legalistic approach developed by the president and his staff. The union hoped that by filing a suit ("politically embarrassing") against the Mayor's patronage machine, we would be able to blackmail the city into a contract with higher wages and seniority. The workers had no part in this strategy, except to be expected to show up at rallies called by the union — i.e. as shock troops. And no one even knew what the legal case was about! It was when the legal strategy seemed to be stalling negotiations that members began to question the strategy. The president actively tried to suppress any broad discussions. When Contract Action Committee members asked if we were going to strike, he refused to answer the question saying that the negotiators were talking about such matters. He later told the negotiators that the strategy discussions had to be tabled because he didn't want any leaks of our plans to the city. He tried to play one democratic form against another, for his own ends. It was only after coming out in support of the strike that he voiced his 'honest' views. He said that he always opposed strikes (in principle) unless he was backed into a corner. At the hospital, he realized that we would walk without him, so he decided to back the strike so that he could lead it. He didn't want to find himself being dragged along by the membership!

The president's efforts to control the course of the strike meant that staff members were put in charge of every committee we set up. Decisions by the

members would often be overturned by the staff. When the community outreach committee decided to have a press conference to get support for the strike, the staff cancelled it because other things were "more pressing." Their fears were that other more Left or oppressed nationality groups would get into the limelight. The president's opposition to this kind of community support reflects his white chauvinism; he will actively look for support from white-based community groups, but avoid it from Black community leaders. He is afraid of alienating his white membership (the base of his support). He once publicly commented that he would rather build a rally with the backing of a particular white supremacist community group than with the backing of a Black community group which was organizing against violence against the Black community. He would rather sacrifice support from the Black and Hispanic communities than face the loss of part of his white support.

This conciliating with white supremacy is widespread and encouraged in the staff. Most of the union leadership opposed affirmative action proposals in the contract. When the union office printed up the list of clauses won in the new contract, no mention was made of a new clause on affirmative action (meaning they saw it as a loss?). And office jokes were made that the only way to win office in this city's labor movement, is to have an Irish last name. And while it is a joke, chances are the next slate of officers running with the president will reflect this.

While white supremacy goes unchallenged in the office, the local openly supports issues of women's rights. They encouraged us to present proposals on day care to the city, strengthening maternity rights, and they have close ties to a local chapter of Working Women. While the struggle for women's rights is legitimate in their eyes, the struggle against national oppression is 'more complicated' and threatens to lose them some support. If we ever hope to place this struggle within the union, we will have to be organized independently before the president will be anything but oppositionist. We will have to raise an issue, have members mobilized around it . . . that is, be a force he feels he has to control, before the union will openly back any such struggle.

Perhaps the most profound difference we had with the president during this strike crystalized over what the direction forward will be for public sector unions in the next decade. While the president is a progressive in the labor movement overall, he still hasn't broken significantly with a narrow view of the trade union struggle. This was reflected in arguments we had over what type of force it would take to make the Mayor back down, and what type of strike to build up. This issue will be dealt with in depth in the last half of the paper.

Forces Within the Local

At times we were successfully able to defeat the president's views by building up an alliance with other forces within the local. This alliance was built issue by issue. And perhaps the most important lesson we learned in building up this work was that

such an alliance was possible only when the Left was convinced, and convincing about what needed to be done. To understand something about the actual work that was built up, we need to understand the various forces in the local, which includes the staff and union leadership as well as divisions among the rank and file members.

This particular SEIU local is broken up into various locations city-wide. Where members work closely with the Mayor's people or the police, we found some strong center leaders who are influenced by conservative views and white chauvinism. While at times these members demanded miracles from the union, they were generally the least organized, least militant, and most unwilling to buck the machine. Negotiators from City Hall and the Police Department initially opposed striking, placed a lot of hope on the legal case, and were pessimistic about organizing their members. But within these departments there were a few strong and more progressive leaders. Their stronger ties with members, their willingness to organize and agitate, and their open views gave hospital negotiators room to move in. These forces became the main link between workers at the hospital and the rest of the city departments.

The local leadership and staff is also a mixture of forces. The president has aligned our local with the social democratic wing of the labor movement. He hopes to build our local into the center of progressive unionism in the state. He came to power on a bandwagon of democracy, and is trying to build himself up as a liberal trade unionist. We have found ourselves able to work together with him and the staff on many issues. The staff he has hired is more "to the Left" than he is. They are young, white and educated, most having worked for progressive organizations at one time or another. They honestly want to "organize the working class," though few of them have worked regular jobs. But while talking democracy and working class solidarity, they are often caught up in trying to make the membership reach "pragmatic" decisions. Because most of the staff has never worked as a city worker, and are removed from the rank and file, they tend to underestimate the ability and willingness of the workers to fight. They also carry with them some of the white chauvinism of more populist community organizations . . . not wanting to take up issues like affirmative action which they view as divisive. While they can often point to the weaknesses of our membership, you don't get a sense that they see any of its strength. They tend to hold up examples of the center (like Nixon's silent majority) as the group on which they base their decisions and tactics. They aim to lead the center, while trying to bring the "extremes" of the Left and the right under this leadership.

Within the hospital itself, there were strong divisions and different levels of organization. The technicians were highly organized, and were set on getting a 10% raise like the nurses. Their concerns reflected their more professional status; they were less concerned about job security, were more militant and mostly concerned about their own departments. Some were (and still are) interested in forming their own bargaining unit to win more professional concessions from management.

Technical departments employ workers who are generally younger, better educated, a higher percentage of men, and mostly all white. As a whole, they have little respect for the clerical units, and are isolated off in their own departments. Clerks, on the other hand, are a more diverse group; a combination of older white women, along with younger Black, Hispanic and white women. As unskilled city workers, many as single heads of households, their chief concern was for seniority in lay-offs and promotions. On many union issues, they have had the most consistent participation, and taken the more progressive views. They quickly backed the demand for translators, seniority and amnesty. And because they are the more multinational workforce, most of the Black and Hispanic support on the lines came from the clerks. This meant that lines in front of a clerical building were racially mixed, while lines near the accident floor (covered by nurses and techs) were mostly all white. These divisions remained unchanged during the course of the strike, leading to some tensions. The technical division was more dissatisfied with the final contract offer because of the seniority language and amnesty clause. This different perspective on what we won in the contract led to some of the techs blaming clerks for "selling out" for job security; other techs again started to say that techs should have their own bargaining unit. While these tensions never exploded, they remain beneath the surface, and will affect the character of future union actions.

As progressive leaders in the local, we were slow in realizing that our "opposition" to the union leadership was not enough to win us respect. Without plans, strategy or demands, center forces would follow the lead (or lack of leadership) of the union officials. Opposing the president's legal strategy wasn't enough. We had to come up with our own plans and perspective to convince other workers of viable alternatives. When we were able to do this, we were able to force the president and staff to back us up. When we didn't have a clear view of where to go, we couldn't gather support and appeared as oppositionists. Our first real break in the negotiations was realizing that his strategy for legal blackmail was going to hurt us, that we had to put the issue of striking before our membership. We went out and boldly organized for a strike. This turned the tables, forced the president to back the strike, and brought the center forces actively behind the leadership of the Left forces in the local.

The Struggle for Equality

One of the shortcomings of the negotiations was the failure to raise (in any consistent way) the demands of various nationalities within the membership. This mistake wasn't due to the objective conditions — there was the basis of support for demands such as affirmative action and translators. The failure was the fault of progressives who didn't try to organize independently for these demands (as they did around the issue of striking), so that there was no organized pressure to support specific contract demands.

While at the time we underestimated the support we could get for demands for affirmative action language, or the problems that would be created by a strict

seniority clause for lay-offs, we are confronted by these issues head-on today. In the wake of the recent tax-cutting referendum, it is estimated that 75% of all minorities in municipal and state jobs will be laid off. Out of 250 minority firemen, 10 will be left after lay-offs. The Mayor (who won weak support from the Black community in the last elections), is using this issue to say that he will ignore the seniority clauses of contracts to secure minority positions. A suit has been threatened to insure that straight seniority will not wipe out the gains in minority hiring. And the unions have generally come out in defense of straight seniority, putting them on a collision course with the Mayor and the courts. Instead of looking to the Black community for support, instead of exposing the Mayor's call for affirmative action (that will guarantee him a patronage arm in the Black community), instead of coming out in favor of affirmative action and proposing new language that would guarantee fairness in lay-offs as well as equality, the major unions have backed themselves into a corner. Our failure to recognize this scenario in the contract negotiations meant we failed to find ourselves allies in the local who could counter the backward position of the union leadership.

There were two points where contract language was raised that defended the rights of oppressed nationalities. One was the city's proposal for new affirmative action language. The union opposed this language at the table because it asked the union to implement the city's affirmative action goals and guidelines. Without input into these goals, the union was rightfully suspicious of the abuse the Mayor would make of such language. This view got the support of the majority of the negotiators. At this point, the hospital negotiators could have done one of two things: we could have let the debate stand at this (the union in effect opposing affirmative action language), or we could have countered with a proposal of our own. We could have taken this proposal to rank and file members and gotten support for our views. This type of action could have turned affirmative action into a major debate in the contract struggle. More progressive forces could have taken this opening as an opportunity to lead, and organize, in hopes of winning other middle forces to stand for equality, in opposition to the rightist views of the union. Because we were cautious about intervening, the debate remained between the city and the union, with the issue pushed under the table.

It was later in the negotiations that we learned some more about our ability to move some of the center leaders. The hospital Contract Action Committee had proposed language asking for pay and training for bilingual workers who were expected to translate for the city. We expected strong opposition to this language, and were shocked when some of the more racist negotiators spoke in favor of the proposal. They saw the need for such language, because they had the experience of not being able to deliver services because of the scarcity of bilingual employees. Appealing to their union sense of justice (that all workers should be paid for extra work they are expected to do), all the negotiators voted to keep the translators clause in the contract proposals to the very end.

As part of the strike settlement, we won the contract language we had proposed. That came as a shock to all concerned. But, while winning the language, our failure to organize rank and file members to fight for this language during the strike, meant there was no center of workers who saw the language as a victory for them. The victory was lost in the shuffle of other demands, while no one learned the lessons that contract struggles can be site for the struggle for democratic rights. In fact, six months after the contract has been in effect, the city has still failed to start paying for training employees. We are now in the position of beginning to organize forces to defend this language . . . a place we wouldn't have to be if we had done the organizing around the contract fight.

At the same time that we failed to organize oppressed nationality workers around specific contract language, our failure to highlight such language meant that we never struggled with other sections of the union to back demands for equality. To some degree, the tensions between the clerks and the techs reflected this lack of struggle. And because the main issues we struck over were wages and seniority, the majority of the activists remained mainly white (the union had always had white leaders). These leaders, while respected for their role as militants, have not become seen as fighters for equality. In fact, most complaints about discrimination still go outside to local or federal agencies. While we were able to lead a successful strike, our leadership did little to win us support as fighters against national oppression.

Training in Tactics

Being organized isn't an end in itself — the strike meant we had to make important decisions about when to strike, when to return to work, what type of picket line to set up, etc. Throughout the month before the strike, there were large differences between sections of the membership about when (or if) to strike. The hospital is only one third a city-wide unit . . . a unit that was not preparing to strike anywhere else. The drift in the negotiating committee was to not allow the hospital to walk out. At the hospital, some of the technical departments were talking about immediate walk-outs, department by department if necessary. Some individuals called for "no contract, no work" . . . even though the end of the contract was only 5 days away, we had no organization and no authorization to strike! These views were weak because they did not move the pro-strike sections to see the need for winning other sections to back a strike, or how important organization was going to be to lead a strike. While it would have been disastrous for an unplanned walk-out at the hospital to fizzle, the negotiators were not quick to realize the important and leading role the hospital could play for the whole local. A militant walk-out at the hospital could teach City Hall and the Police civilians that struggle (not patronage) pays.

Trying to avert a premature strike, the hospital negotiators took the position that we needed to get 75% support at the hospital before they would call a walk-out. To maintain a strike against all the pressures of the Mayor's machine, we had to go out with a strong majority. And, in retrospect, the problems that developed between the

police civilians, City Hall and hospital over the terms of the final settlement (like how important was the final amnesty clause), makes many of the negotiators nervous about ever letting just one department walk out again. The tactic of a partial walk-out worked this time, but should not become a tactic to be relied on in the future.

PART II OF THIS SUM-UP WILL APPEAR IN THE NEXT ISSUE. IT FOCUSES ON THE NEED TO BUILD WORKER-COMMUNITY ALLIANCES. WE WILL ALSO REPRINT A CRITICISM OF OUR WORK IN THIS STRIKE.

How To Think About The Soviet Union

It is no secret that the capitalist restoration thesis is in some difficulty. Critics have challenged its theoretical coherence while new and more systematic studies of Soviet society have demolished much of its empirical support. Unfortunately, communists whose analysis of the international situation rests on the contention that the Soviet Union is an imperialist superpower have not really confronted this situation squarely or even acknowledged it publicly.

The sharpest challenge comes from the so-called "anti-dogmatists," especially Michael Goldfield and Melvin Rothenberg's *The Myth of Capitalism Reborn*. This book is well worth reading. Goldfield and Rothenberg accurately identify major weaknesses in the main arguments produced during the 1970's — for example, Martin Nicolaus, *Restoration of Capitalism in the USSR* published by the October League; *Red Papers 7* published by the Revolutionary Union; and the many articles over the years in *Peking Review* and *Albania Today*. The empirical material offered often amounted to little more than reporting rumor and gossip as fact; data was not assessed in a comprehensive and scientific way; experiments and theoretical debate were confused with policy. The interest aroused by *The Myth of Capitalism Reborn* is another signal of the end of a period in which it seemed possible to rely on China's prestige instead of making an independent analysis of such issues as what happened in the Soviet Union.

Many of the current policies of the CPC contradict in practice the restoration thesis as Marxists have popularized it. The expanded role of enterprise profit, the increased reliance on market signals, the greater importance accorded to individual material incentives, a return to a competitive and elite educational system, and the enthusiasm for Western influences all seem little different from policies once cited to demonstrate the return of capitalism in the Soviet Union. Marxists obviously have a problem here. If we don't want to jump to hasty conclusions about China then we have to begin rethinking the basis of the capitalist restoration thesis.

Communists in this country who support the Three Worlds thesis have to tackle these problems — they are not going to go away by themselves. But we face a somewhat paradoxical situation. Whatever the weakness in our current understanding of the Soviet Union, world events increasingly confirm that the Soviet Union is in fact an imperialist super-power bent on seizing world hegemony from a declining U.S. imperialism. The basic elements of the Three Worlds thesis provide the only view that consistently accounts for major international events in the post-Vietnam era, from U.S. paralysis around Angola and failure to impose its will on Third World countries such as Iran and Nicaragua to Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and initiative in its confrontation with the U.S. This is a major reason for confidence that in the long run we will resolve the debate over the nature of the Soviet Union along the lines of the capitalist restoration thesis. It is striking, for example, that the Communist Workers Party almost totally ignores the evidence of Soviet aggression and domination in its recent rejection of the restoration thesis, at least in the arguments it chose to publish recently in the *Guardian* (6/3/81, 6/10/81).

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There are basically four distinct contending positions among Marxists on the class character of the Soviet Union:

1. The Soviet Union is socialist;
1. The Soviet Union is in transition to socialism;
3. The Soviet Union is a new, stable, exploitative mode of production;
4. The Soviet Union is state capitalist.

We should reject the position (advanced, for example in Nicolaus's 1975 book) that the Soviet Union is a monopoly capitalist society "just like" the U.S., and we should not be drawn into futile attempts to prove that it is. But this does not mean we jump over to the view that it is socialist, as the CWP has. In the long run, we can rely on the working class and oppressed people in the U.S. to distinguish between socialism and what exists in the Soviet Union today. At the same time, we should avoid going overboard in running down Soviet life. After all, it should not be surprising that the Soviet people have held onto some of the gains made during socialist construction. In the U.S. too, gains made by the working class can be reversed only after a serious offensive on the part of the ruling class. We can acknowledge that the Soviet working class does not live under the same kind of ferocious insecurity suffered in the U.S. (although facts here are quite mixed) without saying it is a socialist country. Life is better in Sweden, yet its welfare state is not socialism.

The key question is political: which class holds state power? It is striking that not a single book or article arguing the socialist character of the Soviet Union can demonstrate that the working class holds state power there. The struggle of the Polish working class makes no sense if you think that class holds state power

through "its" communist party. Irwin Silber calls this struggle a reactionary one — the only possible conclusion since he thinks the Soviet Union is socialist. The growth of anti-semitism and national oppression in the Soviet Union, and the absence of mass progressive movements such as an anti-war movement, an anti-nuclear movement, or, indeed, an anti-revisionist movement at the very least throws doubt on the existence of working class rule in the Soviet Union. The construction of socialism has turned out to be more complex than people once thought, but if we hold to the significance of which class predominates in this construction then it cannot be argued that the Soviet Union is socialist.

The idea that the Soviet Union is in transition to socialism is a compromise that doesn't work. This argument depends first of all on the incorrect idea that socialism is a stable mode of production. Aside from this, sixty years of socialist construction should produce something closer to socialism that has been achieved in the Soviet Union. A recent review of Goldfield and Rothenberg's book in the *Guardian* (1/14/81, 1/21/81) points out that their own evidence shows that the Soviet Union is not moving towards socialism.

The third position, that the Soviet Union is a new form of "post-capitalist" or "post-revolutionary" society, is growing in popularity. People tend to see the U.S.S.R. as some sort of state collectivism in which the ruling class is the state bureaucracy (an idea close to Marx's Asiatic Mode of Production). One big problem is that this focus on the state's role in organizing society and extracting a surplus doesn't specify an underlying mode of production. On the other hand, this difficulty might be resolved and it might be wise for us to reserve judgement, if for no other reason than a lot of East European Marxists with direct experience of Soviet dominated societies seem to believe in it.

The state capitalism thesis is associated primarily with French Marxist Charles Bettelheim. This thesis shares features of the third position but specifies the underlying mode of production — capitalism. A lot of work needs to be done, but we can say the most common criticisms miss the mark. Goldfield and Rothenberg argue that the concept of state capitalism is not Marxist; they say that the existence of many capitals competing in the market is the essence of Marx's concept of capitalism. This is wrong. The exploitation of wage labor by capital and the extraction of surplus value is the essence of capitalism. Goldfield and Rothenberg's criticism of the state capitalism thesis replaces the class struggle with intracapitalist competition. Naturally this leads to a confused conception of socialism too, one which is introduced from above rather than fought for by the people. A further error is Goldfield and Rothenberg's confusion between legal "private property" and actual control over the means of production. While we should not commit ourselves blindly to the state capitalism thesis, the disproofs of it have little value.

The immediate political stake in all this is the connection between the nature of the Soviet Union and the role it plays in the world today. The four views stack up as follows. If the Soviet Union is socialist then it is certainly not an imperialist power.

Irwin Silber therefore interprets every Soviet occupation and (Soviet-supported occupation) as a defense of socialism. The transition to socialism idea winds up in this position too, giving "critical" rather than all-out support to Soviet expansion. The subtle distinction is of little use to the Kampuchean and Afghan peoples.

Supporters of the third hypothesis have said little systematic about the Soviet role in the world today, but they seem inclined to argue as follows. In the last analysis the Soviet Union may be a reactionary force, but this must be assessed concretely by looking at the relationship between capitalism and "post-capitalist" society. Because the latter is a "higher" stage than capitalism it is progressive in comparison, just as capitalism is progressive in comparison to feudalism. Thus the Soviet Union's role is objectively progressive whenever it goes up against U.S. imperialism. Furthermore, since no one has proven that the Soviet Union must conquer foreign markets or export capital as a matter of internal economic necessity, we cannot say it is imperialist (there are echoes of the "just like the U.S." position here) and for this reason too it is progressive in comparison. Thus while the "post-capitalist" society hypothesis does not lead to support for all Soviet actions, it does tend to support those which can be interpreted as directed against U.S. imperialism.

One weakness of this position is the assumption that the "later appearing" mode ("post-capitalist" society) is always "higher" and more progressive. This is a mechanistic stage theory of the same type proposed in more extreme form by the



Soviet soldiers stand beside main road connecting Afghanistan's capital of Kabul with city of Jalalabad. AP

CLP: "Once something has developed from a lower to higher quality it cannot change back." (Jonathon Aurthur, *Socialism in the Soviet Union*, p.8.) In fact, the defeat of the U.S. imperialism by Soviet social-imperialism (all other things being equal) would be an historic defeat for the world's people. Furthermore, the working class always has its own aims, independent of the needs of the ruling class. Lenin forcefully opposed the idea that the working class supported the development of capitalism in Russia, even "critically".

Oftentimes people seem to reject the state capitalism thesis mainly because they do not want to abandon the "progressive character" implications of the "post-capitalist" society hypothesis, if, indeed, these implications are valid. But it must be recognized that even Bettelheim has not had that much to say about the Soviet role in the world (aside from his rejection of the Three Worlds thesis). Neither he nor his co-workers has convincingly drawn the explicit connections between state capitalism and Soviet expansionism.

Part of the problem may lie in a disagreement over what it means to say that imperialism is a stage of capitalism. Many people understand capitalism as the "internal" (to the nation-state) relations of production, and imperialism as the "external" (to the nation-state) effect of these relations of production. In other words, they see the problem as proving the Soviet Union is capitalist from which it will then follow it is imperialist. But this is wrong since in the stage of imperialism production relations link together the various social formations. Lenin referred to this as the "imperialist chain." Imperialist exploitation and domination are not a side effect of capitalism, but are constitutive of it. Therefore it is not possible to determine the nature of the Soviet Union without discussing Soviet invasions, occupations and expansion. Among other things this has to lead to great nation chauvinism.

Even if state capitalism best describes Soviet society, and this still seems most reasonable, the Soviet Union is, in a sense, a new type of social formation. This means there is a lot of theoretical work to be done, and we can't wait for someone else to do it for us. But we cannot stop struggling against Soviet expansion until we figure everything out. Soviet expansion itself confirms the assessment that the U.S.S.R. is a class and exploitative society which the Soviet people must overthrow.

Nuclear Blackmail

"My brothers and sisters didn't get to the shelter in time, so they were burnt and crying. Half an hour later, my mother appeared. She was covered with blood. She had been making lunch at home when the bomb was dropped. My younger sisters died the next day. My mother — also died the next day. And then my older brother died . . ."

— testimony of Fujio Tsujimoto
five year old resident of Nagasaki
when the atomic bomb was dropped
on that city, August 9, 1945

For thirty-six years, the world has lived under the cloud of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a cloud that looms larger day by day. Today one push of a button in Washington or Moscow could unleash the complete destruction of human life as we know it. The talk we hear today of "winnable nuclear war" or the need to reach "nuclear superiority" means that our worst nightmares may yet turn to reality.

How can we stop this mad arms-race competition? How can we once and for all dismantle all nuclear weapons and finally dispell the cloud of Hiroshima and Nagasaki from the face of the earth?

To Stop Nuclear War — Disarm the Superpowers

Nuclear weapons have radically transformed the terms of world politics, but vital political questions still have to be asked. There are still aggressors in the world and those who defend against aggression. Strategy and tactics still may have meaning — even for the movement against nuclear madness.

For instance, President Reagan wants us to focus our attention on stopping the spread of nuclear weapons to Third World nations. In his words, "further proliferation" is what threatens "international peace, regional and global stability and the security interests of the United States and other countries . . ." (*New York Times*, July 17, 1981.)

But it is *not* the development of nuclear weapons by Third World countries which poses the greatest threat to international peace and security. It is first the Soviet Union, and then the United States, which threaten total disaster. Infamous for their aggression, bent on world domination, and capable of carrying out nuclear holocaust, these two superpowers press us to the brink of a new world war.

Our best strategy for disarmament and for world peace will focus on these two aggressors.

A Sensible Proposal

So far high-level strategic arms talks between the superpowers have produced little result. In Europe and the United States a people's movement grows in response, demanding disarmament now. Recently, former Ambassador George Kennan suggested a way this movement can cut through the red tape. He proposes pressuring the United States to offer a 50% across-the-board nuclear weapons cut in exchange for the same commitment from the Russians. Further mutual cuts would follow until no nuclear weapons remained.

Direct and sensible, this plan challenges the two superpowers to live up to their claims of self-defense or deterrence. Only a nation bent on domination over other nations would set as its goal its *own* nuclear superiority. A nation genuinely interested in deterrence would embrace the best defense of all — complete elimination of nuclear weaponry.

At the same time, Kennan does not propose unilateral disarmament of the United States. This also makes sense. The atomic bomb was used only once, in 1945 when the U.S. feared no nuclear retaliation from any country. Judging from its fantastic weapons build-up and its current activities around the world, you can bet the Soviet Union would do the same if it had the chance. To make matters worse, no Russian anti-nuclear movement exists to restrain the government. Unilateral disarmament of the United States in these circumstances would hasten, not postpone, a nuclear attack.

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The threat of the superpowers' nuclear arsenals is great, but today the desire for peace is an even more potent force. Joined in an international movement, we can force the United States and the Soviet Union to live up to their rhetoric of deterrence. The rest of the world can break the superpowers nuclear blackmail against us all and dismantle their arsenals of destruction.

ACROSS-THE-BOARD NUCLEAR WEAPONS CUTS NOW

DISARM THE NUCLEAR SUPERPOWERS

THE BEST DETERRENCE — NO NUCLEAR WEAPONS AT ALL!

PROLETARIAN UNITY LEAGUE

August 1981

Building The Black United Front

1980 brought with it a call to build a strong national Black United Front to meet the economic and political offensive already well under way against Black people. A national conference was organized which brought together activists from across the country and which drew upon the experience and strengths of local Black United Fronts in places like New York, Philadelphia, Mississippi, Cairo, Illinois, Portland, the Bay area and Boston. 1980 also saw the start of efforts to organize a National Independent Black Political Party and a first congress was held in August 1981. While things are moving ahead slowly, we can undoubtedly expect to see new political initiatives from these formations in the months to come.

We are including here two selections relevant to the subject of building Black United Fronts from our Nationalities Commission. The first discusses why the African Liberation Support Committee (1973 – 1976) was unable to maintain its united front character and grow. It is an edited version of longer paper, “Black Workers Take the Lead” or On Proclaiming the Leadership of the Working Class Struggle.” The other selection presents eight discussion points concerning the nature of Black United Fronts and how to go about building them on a local level. This second selection is from a longer draft paper “Preliminary Views on Revolutionary Work in the Afro-American People’s Liberation Movement.”

The Black United Front is Multi-Class in Character

Black people are oppressed as a people. This fact should not need repeating except that there are those both within and without the Black Liberation Movement who tend to forget this salient reality. Certainly there are significant class differences among Black people which must be taken into account. While it is true that the brunt of white racist oppression is felt by the Black working class, it is also true that when racist police want to smash heads they do not ask their Black victim if he or she is a doctor, lawyer, or machine operator.

These often acknowledged facts are brought out here because some super-revolutionaries have denied the multi-class character of the Black Liberation Movement by calling for a Black United Front in such a way that it becomes composed rather exclusively of progressive intellectuals. Needless to say, this was done in the name of the revolutionary leadership of the Black working class. The use of the slogan “Black Workers Take the Lead” symbolized this error in one united front effort: the African Liberation Support Committee (1973 – 1976).

All Marxist revolutionaries want to see the Black working class carry on its leading role in the multi-class Black United Front. We want this because we know that this class has the most consistent interest in socialist revolution as the only real answer to the basic problems of Afro-American life. The assumption of leadership is not a spontaneous process which automatically happens because the majority of Black folks are workers — 90%. Leadership by the working class will be won in battles around the concerns of the masses, often in the face of initiatives and challenges by petit bourgeois and bourgeois leaders. We cannot side-step this struggle with a proclamation of working class leadership.

“Black Workers Take the Lead” Is an Ultra-Left Slogan

A united front is an effort to unite all that can be united, regardless of class . . . For this reason, the slogan “Black Workers Take the Lead” is exclusive rather than a call for unity. Without struggling with other classes, it declares “if you are not ready to be led by the working class, (or its announced representatives), you are not welcome here.” This kind of ultra-left posturing leads to the dissolution of united front efforts. The Left leadership in the African Liberation Support Committee (ALSC), for example, raised this slogan in 1974 when it decided that a more revolutionary direction was need in ALSC and petty bourgeois reformists and cultural nationalists seemed to be standing in the way. In the ensuing struggle, reformists (including elected politicians, many intellectuals and professionals), many nationalists and other non-Marxist-Leninist democratic forces quit the organization. Needless to say, *the workers did not replace them.*

This brings up another point. The slogan is not leading. As the slogan for a national anti-imperialist organization, it did not identify any particular struggle or give guidance on *how* to bring about working class leadership. It did not point to how to build programmatic unity with the Left and Center forces in the Black Liberation Movement or even unity among the Left alone. Instead, it represented a tendency called “struggle by fiat.” That is, proclaim the result without struggling to bring it into being. This ultra-left approach assumes that petty bourgeois reformist leadership (and even reactionary nationalist leadership) has been discredited among the masses. If people are not voting, the *assumption* is that the masses have moved beyond electoral politics to preparing for armed revolution. If the local NAACP chapter is weak, the *assumption* is that it is because the masses are consciously waiting for a revolutionary working class organization. This day

dreaming is costly. Reformism is still the dominant ideological force among the Black masses and it will not roll over and die with any proclamation that we cannot back up. The leading role of working class ideology as well as the practical and political necessity of bringing the Black working class to the forefront of the Black Liberation Movement must be proved to the Black masses by the conscientious application of Marxism-Leninism to ongoing struggles (including program, strategy and tactics) of the Black Liberation Movement. During this process mistakes will be made, but if honestly accepted and quickly corrected, working class leadership will become fact rather than slogan.

The slogan "Black Workers Take the Lead" is ultra-left for one more reason. To accept this slogan you not only have to be anti-imperialist, you would have to be Marxist, or pretty close to it. Marxists struggle for leadership of the working class because of a particular analysis of the interplay of classes and the necessities of revolution. At the present historical point where the basic tenets of Marxism are little known outside of limited circles, even the broad masses of Black workers could not rally around this slogan.

What Happened Under This Slogan

The slogan "Black Workers Take the Lead" was developed as part of the effort to combat an incorrect view held by some nationalists which denied the significance of class struggle and class differentiation. Some nationalist politicians and groups like the All-African People's Revolutionary Party and the Congress of African Peoples had at the outset adamantly maintained that while classes may exist in the Black community, their significance was inconsequential. Whites were the enemy and all Blacks must unite to fight them. The Left leadership of ALSC, including Mark Smith, Owusu Sadaukai, Abdul Alkalimat . . . (soon to represent the communist organization known as the Revolutionary Workers League) opposed this view with the more correct Marxist analysis that the Black Liberation Movement must deal with issues of both race and class. The latter's attempt to put forward and struggle for a more correct line brought forward the slogan "Black Workers Take the Lead." This ultra-left response to the reactionary nationalist position proved just as dangerous.

The most dramatic result of this line and slogan was that ALSC's base dwindled quickly. Mass confusion raged in the organization beginning with the Frogmore conference in June 1973. The document united around at this conference called for ALSC to take an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist position with the Black working class at the lead both ideologically and practically. Few of the non-Marxist-Leninist democratic forces were quite prepared for this big change in direction. Being neither Marxist-Leninist nor nationalist, most fell out of the organization through the crevices between the two poles. To deal with this situation, basic Marxist-Leninist study circles were hurriedly set up in most of the chapters, but to no avail (these circles were to be used to pull the core of the ALSC together and unite

members around a common direction). At a time when ALSC need to grow, efforts to reach out to non-Marxist-Leninist democratic forces declined. Many honest but reformist elements were maligned as members of the so-called "comprador petty bourgeoisie" and discounted as necessary elements of the united front (the Frogmore document includes in this category all local and national Black politicians and elected officials).

Given the broad array of political forces in early ALSC, political struggle among different political tendencies was only natural. If handled correctly, this struggle could have strengthened the mass base of the organization. It did not. Let's look once more at the struggle over working class leadership. The positions in support of or in opposition to working class leadership in the Black Liberation Movement were ideological in character. In mass organizations, ideological struggle should be raised concretely over *program, strategy and tactics*. In proceeding to this manner, the masses have a say and a stake in the process and outcome, as well as the movement of the organization. The struggle over working class leadership, for example, could have been waged over: (a) what local issues had greater mass appeal, (b) how to ally with the largely Black union locals, (c) whether a big forum should be held in a popular church or at a university, (d) how important is it to gain the organized support of the Black longshoremen, etc. The solutions to these questions reflect ideological positions. In taking up the struggle in this way, everyone can participate — not just those already trained in Marxism or the leading spokespeople among the nationalist organizations. Otherwise, the masses will simply vote with their feet — which they did in the ALSC.

Another consequence of this incorrect policy is that Marxism-Leninism was given a "worse" name in the Black community and labelled an instrument of division of Black unity. The government-sponsored red-baiting of the 1950's and early 1960's plus the sell out of the Black Liberation Movement by the Communist Party, USA during the same period had made Marxism-Leninism an extremely weak ideological trend in the Black Liberation Movement. World-wide struggles against imperialism as well as political advances in the Black Liberation Movement during the 1960's and 1970's once more put Marxism-Leninism on the agenda of ideological choices. Wariness of Marxism-Leninism by honest and dishonest forces should have been expected given the uneven history of communism and the Afro-American people's liberation movement. The most backward elements in ALSC in 1973 – 1974 railed against the introduction of what they considered "White Boy Ideology" in the organization. Some claimed such an ideology was by nature "divisive" to Black unity. Unfortunately, events that followed appeared to give credence to that point of view.

In 1974, the core of the Marxist-Leninists in ALSC were members of the newly formed Revolutionary Workers League. They held many key positions in both local and the national ALSC structure. In line with their ultra-left orientation as summed up in "Black Workers Take the Lead," they called for the disbandment of ALSC

in 1975 so that progressive elements within ALSC could concentrate their energies at the "point of production" rather than in the communities. (Note: this move was called for one year *after* many Center and nationalist forces quit the organization after it lost its united front character.) Because of the key leadership positions of RWL cadre, this move would have spelled the death of ALSC and the protests against this move were loud. Due to this protest, RWL leadership decided to re-evaluate its position but it was too late. The anti-Marxist-Leninist forces (the few within ALSC as well as the many outside of the organization) now had the ammunition they needed to once more discredit Marxism-Leninists as "proven" splitters and wreckers of Black unity efforts. While being in complete disagreement with the view that the introduction of Marxism-Leninism itself destroyed ALSC, it is understandable that such views would gain popularity when the Marxist-Leninists under the influence of ultra-left tendencies commit such dangerous political errors.

In Sum

The call in the 1980's is for strong local united front efforts summed up in a strong national Black United Front in order to meet the offensive already being waged against Black people. The struggle for ideological hegemony over this and other mass efforts has already begun (i.e., the struggle over which class viewpoint will direct the development and direction of the people's movement). In taking up this struggle we are not beginning from scratch. We have a rich history of successes and failures to learn from. ALSC's unsuccessful effort to maintain its united front character is one such lesson. If we are to avoid a repetition of history, then it is essential that revolutionaries come to grips with the seriousness of the 'left' opportunist errors made in the ALSC. We cannot pass off these errors as just "mistakes" which "we have all made." When in the current situation of the building of Black United Fronts, some revolutionaries begin to repeat old mistakes or aspects of old mistakes, then we know that lessons have not been sufficiently learned. It behooves us to fight ultra-leftism in order to unite the many to defeat the few. We can only hope that this short paper is some assistance in overcoming these old, though much alive deviations.

EIGHT DISCUSSION POINTS CONCERNING BLACK UNITED FRONTS

In June of 1980, Black activists from across the country met in New York to form a National Black United Front. Preceding this historical occasion, several cities had already developed local Black United Fronts or pre-Front formations. These efforts to unite all who can be united are of short-term as well as long-term (or strategic) importance. In the short-term, Black communities are largely fighting defensive battles against racist attacks, far reaching cuts in social services and to maintain political gains won in the 1960's (e.g., school desegregation, voting rights.) United fronts which draw in the range of forces in our communities and mold them into a strong fighting force will prove to be invaluable organizations. But united fronts are not only defensive organizations. Almost all liberation movements make use of the united front formations to draw on the strength and traditions of existing organizations in fighting the agreed upon enemy.

Since the Black Liberation Movement is a multi-class movement, successful struggle will necessitate an organizational form that facilitates the joint action of Black workers, petty bourgeois forces, and even members of the national bourgeoisie. It is because of the necessity that Black revolutionaries take an active interest in the growth and political development of Black United Fronts that we present the following eight (8) discussion points.

- (1) Black United Fronts should be *coalitions* of organizations and individuals committed to the struggle against imperialism and white-supremacist national oppression. These should be *broad formations* and include all those forces who can achieve a basic level of working unity in opposition to a common opponent. These forces *need not* define the problem in the same terms.
- (2) Black United Fronts (BUF's) cannot be consciously revolutionary mass organizations *in this period*. If BUF's are to be truly united fronts in name and character, they must speak to the current problems in the Black community. They must additionally seek to encompass and represent the broad range of forces active in the Afro-American national movement. This can range from Marxist-Leninists to cultural nationalists to reformist activists.
- (3) For BUF's to seek to encompass the broad range of organizations and progressive thought in the Afro-American national movement, they should not replace existing organizations. Rather, they should be a means to pool resources toward attacking a common target. This will undoubtedly mean a relative fluctuation in participation by different groups.
- (4) The key to building Black United Fronts is the development of a minimum, working program and basic rules of non-sectarian behavior within the Fronts. Program does not equal principles of unity. In some ways, principles of unity are a lot less substantive and critical to the development of BUF's. A program can include certain specific areas around which the BUF makes the commitment to work. This is not the same thing as a "laundry list."

(5) Of these areas, there will generally be *one* area which is the main focus while the other areas continue to operate but do not necessarily receive the time and attention which the main focus does.

(6) For the BUF program to be actively supported, we should guard against BUF's being called into existence by proclamation, but rather Fronts should form as a result of consultation and cooperation by different sections of the more active Afro-American forces: consultation and cooperation tested in actual joint work. This is not to say that BUF's should be formed by the left-wing of the Afro-American movement in isolation from more moderate forces. Consultation and cooperation with active forces include NAACP youth councils or chapters which show a commitment to struggle. It can include active Black trade unionists or Black professionals' groups, as well as block clubs. The essential point is that rather than working from the top down, i.e., rather than first proclaiming the Front and then asking people to come in and join, it is essential for the Black Left to work patiently in winning over broader sectors of the Black population to recognize the need for practical, working unity.

(7) Progressive, mass organizations and united fronts are not the same thing. They should not be confused. If we want to build Fronts, we must be good at building alliances of a variety of forces. While it is essential to win the active support of unaffiliated individuals, Fronts necessitate the close, working collaboration of already organized forces.

(8) We should pay close attention to questions of organization. Bureaucracy can kill an organization, coalition or Front. Structure must flow from the needs of the work and not the other way around. Develop only as many committees and committee heads as there are interested people to do the work. Also, once leadership is determined, it is important to develop a workable method of criticism/self-criticism as a safe-guard against bureaucracy as well as other errors.

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