

# MLP: Long March to Oblivion

At its Fifth Congress in November 1993, the Marxist-Leninist Party of the USA (MLP), a group that once claimed to be the “anti-liquidationist” and “anti-revisionist” party of the American working class, voted to dissolve. The final edition of the *Workers’ Advocate* (WA), dated 28 November 1993, was a single photocopied sheet. It reported that the MLP had lost too many members to continue to produce a monthly paper, and hence the Central Committee concluded that the group had reached “the end of its natural life.” The dissolution statement also included a frank admission by what remained of the MLP leadership that: “Outstanding theoretical problems have multiplied beyond our ability to satisfactorily address them.” A small remnant of the MLP, based in Chicago, the group’s former center, is apparently not quite ready to pack it in. The first issue of its *Theoretical Supplement* published by the “Chicago Workers Voice Group” reports that, “ideological disunity played the key role in the complete dissolution of the party.” Disagreements apparently included:

“1) the assessment of imperialism, 2) analysis of the program of the capitalists and what the program of the working class should be in the post Cold War world, 3) assessment of the role of the working class as a base for revolutionary politics, 4) assessment of Leninism, 5) assessment of Soviet history, and 6) analysis of the role of a small revolutionary party or group in the present situation.”

That doesn’t leave much. With such far-reaching and profound differences, it is remarkable that the MLP survived as long as it did.

## The Long March from Mao Zedong Thought

Since its origins in the late 1960s, the MLP went through several transformations. It began as the American Communist Workers Movement (Marxist-Leninist), ACWM(M-L), a U.S. offshoot of Hardial Bains’ cultist Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist). The absurd and mindless devotion to Mao Zedong that characterized the group at that time is captured in one of its favorite slogans: “Mao- Mao- Mao-Tse Tung! China’s Line is Our Line!” ACWM(M-L) was always on the wacky fringe of American Maoism. Like its Canadian parent in that period, a good deal of the group’s activity involved confrontations with police, or fascists, or, on occasion, with other radicals and leftists—a category the Bainsites subsumed under the heading “social fascists.” In hindsight the MLP characterized much of its activity in this period as “semi-anarchist” and “outrageous” (*WA Supplement* 15 May 1989). We would add “brainless.”

In the early 1970s, as Mao and the Chinese Stalinists were getting cozy with Richard Nixon, ACWM(M-L), by then renamed the Central Organization of U.S. Marxist-Leninists (COUSML), continued to “Hold High the Banner of Mao Tse-Tung Thought.” A few years later, in pursuit of the Tirana franchise, Bains decided that Mao had never been a Marxist and that China had always been capitalist, and began singing the praises of “Social-

ist Albania” under Enver Hoxha. COUSML followed in lock-step. In 1980 COUSML changed its name to the MLP, and the next year broke publicly with the Bainsites. But apart from not having to take abuse from the megalomaniacal Bains, not much changed initially in the group’s politics. It remained devoted to the brutal Stalinist regime in Tirana.

## MLP Breaks with the Popular Front

Over the course of the next few years the MLP gradually turned to the left. Throughout most of the 1980s it distinguished itself as the only Stalinist group in the U.S. to regularly denounce the class-collaborationist politics of those leftists whose activity centered on the Democratic Party. At a time when much of the once formidable Maoist milieu was climbing aboard Jesse Jackson’s “Rainbow Coalition,” the MLP took a more critical attitude. The MLP also criticized overtly liquidationist currents in the Maoist movement internationally, denouncing, for example, their former comrades in the Dominican Republic for abandoning working-class politics in favor of an alliance for “democracy and National Liberation.”

The MLP’s most important international connection in the 1980s was with the Nicaraguan MAP-ML, a potentially significant formation with a small mass base, which had played an independent role in the uprising against Somoza, and stood generally to the left of the governing Sandinista regime. As we noted in *1917* No. 3, the MAP-ML was never able to break decisively with the Sandinistas, but they did make leftist criticisms of the FSLN’s conciliation of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie. The MAP-ML also organized its own small “dual union” which led some strikes and occasional confrontations with the regime. The FSLN responded by periodically sending some of the MAP-ML cadres to jail, and routinely denouncing them as “ultra-lefts.”

The MLP’s criticisms of class collaborationism conflicted with the Stalinist tradition it claimed. After all, Gus Hall (leader of the Communist Party U.S.A.) had not invented the Popular Front—the MLP’s supposedly revolutionary forbears in the CP of the 1930s had made similar adaptations to the “New Deal” Democrats. The MLP undertook to address this apparent contradiction in a series of articles on the history of the American Communist Party, the Spanish Civil War and the history of the Communist International.

This partial step to the left had some far-reaching implications, most of which the MLP felt compelled to dodge, as it was clear that the overt class collaborationism of the American CP, along with the rest of the Communist Parties of the period, originated in Moscow and was endorsed by Joseph Stalin, who remained a revered figure in the MLP pantheon. To cover its right flank, the MLP felt it necessary to turn up the volume and shrillness of its polemics against Trotskyism, as the depth of its criticisms of the Comintern’s class collabo-

rationism increased.

The MLP leadership had to be aware that it was doing no more than crudely rehashing some of the criticisms raised by the Trotskyist International Left Opposition 50 years earlier, but all discussion of this was strictly avoided. The MLP drew the line at 1935, and limited its criticisms to the mistakes made from the Seventh Congress of the Comintern onwards. This left a lot to be explained, including the errors of the German Communist Party that helped pave the way for Hitler, the betrayal of the Chinese Communists to the KMT in 1927, and the sabotage of the British General Strike of 1926 by the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Alliance. All of these were either defended or passed over in silence by the MLP.

### MLP Muddlers and the Russian Question

Most of the theoretical problems that so perplexed the MLP could be traced to its refusal to confront the reality of the Soviet Union. The MLP clung to the Maoist characterization of the USSR as a “revisionist state capitalist” society, in which capitalism had supposedly been restored sometime between the moment that Stalin died and Nikita Khrushchev gave a speech denouncing him. According to the MLP, Khrushchev was the one who had “revised communist principles into bourgeois ideas and practices” (WA, 1 April 1990). This did not explain how “socialism” had turned into “revisionist state capitalism” without requiring any major changes in the personnel of the state apparatus, without any alteration in the mode of operation of the economy, and with the endorsement of the same party cadres who had unanimously supported Stalin only a few years earlier.

In 1989 the MLP addressed the question of Soviet Russia in polemics with the Marxist-Leninist League of Sweden (MLLS), which had abandoned the crude Maoist theories about “capitalist roaders” in favor of Tony Cliff’s social-democratic pseudo-analysis. The MLP was able to show why the USSR was *not* a state-capitalist regime in 1928 (the year the Cliffites claim a capitalist counterrevolution occurred), but this only highlighted their confusion about when and how the “socialist” USSR had gone capitalist. The best the MLP could come up with was the vague assertion that the USSR had, over time, gradually “evolved into a state-capitalist system” (WA, 1 October 1991).

### You Can Ignore History...

The MLP’s historical explorations carefully ignored some of the central events in the early history of the Soviet regime. They ignored Lenin’s deathbed struggle to remove Stalin from the party leadership for bureaucratic abuses. They also ignored the struggle of the Left Opposition against the bureaucratic strangling of internal party democracy and the imposition of the anti-Leninist program of “Socialism in One Country.” So too the whole industrialization debate between Preobrazhensky and Bukharin, and how Stalin’s support to the program of “socialism at a snail’s pace,” gave rise to a powerful restorationist kulak class in the countryside. This error led, in turn, to an abrupt lurch to the left with

the massive forced collectivization, which crippled Soviet agriculture for decades. The MLP’s only comment on the collectivization of the countryside was that it had “major impact on the subsequent development” of the USSR, but they refrained from specifying exactly what that impact was. The MLP had no comment on the Great Purges of the 1930s, where Stalin’s juridical apparatus “proved” that most of the key leaders of the October Revolution, and millions of less prominent Soviet citizens, were imperialist spies, agents and saboteurs. The MLP’s “investigations” of Soviet history never went beyond dabbling because they were circumscribed by the necessity to avoid a political reckoning with Trotskyism, the only coherent critique of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution to emerge from within the Bolshevik tradition.

During the collapse of the Stalinist regimes of the Soviet bloc, the MLP continued to assert, with less and less conviction, that Albania remained a “socialist” country. When the Albanian Party of Labor moved to contain growing unrest by implementing its own version of perestroika, the MLP denounced the “Gorbachev-style” reforms as a “betrayal of socialism.” Yet, according to the MLP’s theory, the market reforms proposed by Gorbachev merely modified the form of capitalism, from “revisionist state capitalism” to regular market capitalism. They could not explain why “socialist” Albania would be prone to the same kind of crisis as the “revisionist state-capitalist” states of the Soviet bloc. Nor how there could be a “Gorbachev-style” reform where there was no state capitalism in the first place. Their inability to account for the remarkable similarities between Albanian “socialism” and “revisionist state capitalism” of the rest of East Europe was, of course, because they were all fundamentally similar social formations, i.e., deformed workers’ states.

### ...But History Won’t Ignore You

During the 1980s the MLP was loosely linked to “anti-revisionist” Maoist groups in Sweden, Spain, Colombia, the Dominican Republic and elsewhere, which also proclaimed their intention to deepen their “Marxism-Leninism” through historical investigations. But all these experiments ended in failure. The Swedish group embraced the “Third Campism” of Tony Cliff, and then dissolved into the social-democratic Workers’ List. The Colombians ended up championing Fidel Castro and the Cuban regime. The Dominicans came to champion outright nationalism. Inside the MLP, there were some who thought that the group’s problems could be solved by changing their name and ditching the hammer and sickle.

The MLP went further than most of its sister groups in attempting to develop a viable historical alternative to the pseudo-Marxist ideological rubbish which was their legacy from Mao Zedong and Stalin. But such projects can never bear fruit if they are premised on a refusal to confront the actual historical and political struggles that took place within the Bolshevik Party and the Comintern after Lenin. The Left Opposition (LO) led the only serious anti-revisionist struggle against the de-

generation of Lenin's party. The MLP would like to write Trotsky off as an "outsider" to Bolshevism. The truth is that, next to Lenin, he was the foremost leader of the party from 1917 on. As the Commissar of War, he forged the Red Army from a dispersed collection of armed worker detachments and guerrilla bands. The LO led the struggle against the bureaucratic strangulation of the Third International under Stalin. It provided the only coherent communist opposition to the sectarian idiocy of the "Third Period." It was the only consistent opponent of the treachery of the class-collaborationist Popular Front which destroyed the Spanish Revolution.

The Bolshevik Tendency sought to intersect the MLP politically during its initial tentative steps to the left. We welcomed their investigation into the history of the Communist movement, and tried to point out the logical contradiction between their sometime leftist impulses and their Stalinist patrimony (see "The Myth of the

'Third Period,' " 1917 No. 3 and "Leninism and the Third Period: Not Twins, But Antipodes," 1917 No. 4). We also proposed to debate them, and sought on a number of occasions to engage them in a serious political exchange. The MLP leadership responded with political evasions and bombastic denunciations of Trotskyism. But, as the group's subsequent disintegration proves, such tactics are no substitute for serious politics.

Those former MLPers who have not reconciled themselves to the inevitability of a world run in the interests of a tiny handful of capitalist parasites, should recall Marx's observation that ignorance never did anybody any good, and have a look at what Trotsky actually wrote. A good place to begin would be with *Third International After Lenin*, which Trotsky submitted to the Sixth Congress of the Comintern, where he was expelled. Find out what went wrong—don't repeat the errors of the past. Learn to think! ■