

MLP's Stalinist Pyrite: The Myth of the 'Third Period'

In the summer before the 1984 election that swept Ronald Reagan into the White House for his second term, Michael Harrington and Irving Howe, two prominent American social democrats, commented in the *New York Times Magazine* that "by now practically everyone on the Left agrees that the Democratic Party, with all its faults, must be our main political arena." They exaggerated—but only slightly. Most of the ostensibly revolutionary organizations in America today are indeed oriented to the Democrats. Some, like the Workers World Party, openly throw themselves into black huckster Jesse Jackson's "Rainbow Coalition." The former Trotskyists of the Spartacist League, on the other hand, respond to the gravitational attraction of the Democrats more obliquely—with, for example, a ludicrous offer to "protect" the 1984 Democratic convention in San Francisco against the hallucinated danger of a Republican/Nazi attack.

The ex-Maoist Marxist-Leninist Party (MLP) is one of the very few exceptions to this rightward trend. The MLP was founded 18 years ago as the American franchise of Hardial Bains' reformist/cultist Canadian-nationalist Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist). It followed CPC-ML out of the legion of Mao Zedong thinkers in the mid-1970's but soon had a falling out with Bains and turned to the left. In an attempt to understand the origins of revisionism in the Maoist and ex-Maoist milieu from whence it came, the MLP has undertaken a critical study of the history of the international communist movement. To date it has traced the roots of degeneration back to 1935 when the Seventh Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) proclaimed that henceforth the duty of the vanguard of the working class was to enter into coalitions (or "popular fronts") with their own bourgeoisies to counter the danger of fascism.

The MLP's Critique of Popular Frontism

The 1 October 1986 issue of the MLP's theoretical journal (the *Workers Advocate Supplement*) contained a scathing critique of the results of the popular-front strategy in Spain during the civil war in the 1930's. It argues that the orientation of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) and the Comintern was "grievously wrong" and specifically criticizes the suppression of the anarchists and the POUM (Workers Party of Marxist Unification—whose leaders included some former Trotskyists) as part of a PCE "propaganda rampage—backed up with police measures—against anything that smacked of the spirit of the class struggle and socialism or that criticized the Republic or the capitalist liberals." The article concludes that:

"Wherever the masses are in struggle against reaction, the Spanish legacy is dredged up to justify bowing before the liberal capitalists in the name of 'broad unity,' while com-

bating the 'greatest danger' posed by the allegedly 'ultra-left' ideas about the political independence of the working class, the class struggle, the proletarian revolution and socialism."

This is pretty strong stuff from an organization with a Stalinist patrimony. And it is not simply a matter of discussion articles in a theoretical journal. The MLP's leftist impulse is reflected in its positions on current international questions from Nicaragua (where it is critical of the Sandinistas' attempts to reach an accommodation with the bourgeoisie) to South Africa. But while it exhibits a subjective attraction to the class-against-class orientation of the Comintern under Lenin, the MLP's leftism is partial, confused and contradictory.

The MLP and the Specter of Trotskyism

The MLP's break with popular frontism is flawed by its timidity in confronting the legacy of Trotskyism. To paraphrase Marx, the residue of its Stalinist heritage weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the MLP's ideological department. Even on those historical questions where it has gone the furthest, e.g., the Spanish Civil War, it is at best only rediscovering positions put forward more clearly and unambiguously fifty years earlier by Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition. (Skeptical MLPers can easily check this for themselves by having a look at any of Trotsky's major writings on Spain, e.g., his December 1937 essay "The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warning.")

The MLP's ingrained anti-Trotskyist reflex is an obstacle to undertaking a serious materialist investigation of the origins of revisionism in the international Communist movement. Its critique of the Seventh Congress is permeated by idealism. Correct policies become incorrect ones as a result of mechanical thinking:

"The Seventh Congress....simply cursed leftism and sectarianism in order to justify abandoning the fundamental Leninist principles that were upheld in the Sixth Congress period. It did not correct rigidities, but gave them a rightist turn—in effect, it took mechanical thinking further and solidified it as engrained rightist views."

—"Between the Sixth and Seventh Congresses,"
Workers Advocate Supplement, 15 July 1986

This explains nothing. Even Mao Zedong knew that "correct [and incorrect] ideas do not fall from the sky." The adoption of the popular-front line in 1935 was no more the result of a "rigid" application of ideas than the current crawling before the Democrats by so much of the American left is due to a failure to understand Lenin.

The turn of the Seventh Congress which the MLP invests with such significance was an event of primarily symbolic importance. In substance it had been signaled a year earlier by the Soviet Union's entry into the League of Nations in search of "peace-loving" allies against Hitler. In May 1935, two months before the congress

opened, Stalin had negotiated the infamous “Laval Pact” with French imperialism as a hedge against a resurgent Germany. The final communique announced: “Mr. Stalin understands and fully approves the policy of national defense made by France in order to keep its armed strength at the level of security.” When the Seventh Congress convened, its task was to ratify this repudiation of Leninism on the grounds that “anti-fascism” transcended class divisions.

Dimitrov spelled out the implications of the turn in his closing speech to the congress: “Even some of the big capitalist states, afraid of losing in a redivision of the world, are at the present stage, interested in avoiding war.” The popular front was aimed at forging a bloc with those “peaceful” imperialist robbers who were satisfied with the division of the world achieved at Versailles in 1919.

“What was new in 1934 and 1935 was the recognition that the defence of the USSR could be assured through the support, not of foreign communist parties too weak to overthrow, or seriously embarrass their national governments, but of the governments of capitalist countries exposed to the same external menace as the USSR, and that the best service which parties could render would be to encourage governments to provide that support.”

—E.H. Carr, *Twilight of the Comintern 1930-1935*

This popular front was dictated not by the requirements of the international proletariat but for the purpose of safeguarding “socialism in one country.” When the social democrats voted for war credits in August 1914, it signified that they valued the preservation of their organizations above the international solidarity of the working class. In a similar fashion, “socialism in one country” counterposed the partial victory achieved in Russia to the interests of the international revolution. In both cases the defense of the limited advances made by the workers, from which the respective bureaucrats derived their privileges, took precedence over the overall goals of the movement.

The Seventh Congress was not the beginning of political departures from Leninism by the Comintern, but the completion of a process which had been underway for a dozen years. Between the Fifth and Sixth Congresses, the “pragmatic” Stalin leadership had already attempted several disastrous experiments in class collaborationism. The Seventh Congress marked the formal transformation of the Comintern into a reformist agency not qualitatively different from the social democracy. In August 1935, even before the delegates had completed their deliberations, Trotsky commented: “Even if all its participants do not today recognize the fact, they are all...busy in practice with the liquidation of the program, principles, and tactical methods established by Lenin, and are preparing the complete abolition of the Comintern as an independent organization” (“The Comintern’s Liquidation Congress”).

Eight years later Stalin dissolved the Comintern as a gesture of good faith in his “democratic” imperialist allies. Who needed a working-class international in an era of peaceful coexistence between classes? The 22 May 1943 statement which announced the dissolution declared that: “In countries of the anti-Hitlerite coalition

the sacred duty of the widest masses of the people, and in the first place of foremost workers, consists in aiding by every means the military efforts of the governments of these countries....” Popular frontism in peacetime inevitably translates into social patriotism when war breaks out. We wonder where the MLP stands on World War II: with the no-strike pledge and “national unity”-mongering of Stalin, Browder and the social democrats or the revolutionary defeatism (and Soviet defensism) of Trotsky and the Fourth International?

The Roots of the Popular Front: ‘Socialism in One Country’

To understand the degeneration of the Comintern it is necessary to understand the degeneration of the revolution which gave it birth. The failure of the revolutionary wave which followed World War I to lift the workers to power anywhere outside the USSR, the exhaustion of the Soviet population after seven years of war and the virtual collapse of the economy had, by 1921, dictated a temporary retreat by the Bolshevik leadership. This policy, known as the New Economic Policy (NEP), centrally involved concessions to market forces to revive production and prevent mass starvation.

The NEP succeeded, but in doing so it created a privileged layer of petty capitalists in both countryside and city (kulaks and Nepmen). These elements constituted a conservative social base for a rapidly developing administrative/bureaucratic layer within the Bolshevik Party itself. The failure of the German Communists to exploit a potentially revolutionary opportunity in the autumn of 1923 made it apparent that the Russian Revolution was likely to remain isolated for some time to come. This further consolidated the position of the ascendant bureaucratic-conservative faction headed by Stalin. For the next five years these “pragmatists,” as they fancied themselves, were to pursue a consistently rightist policy at home and abroad under the banner of “Socialism in One Country.”

In 1925 the Kremlin initiated an ill-fated bloc with the leadership of the British Trade Union Congress (TUC). Ostensibly organized to oppose British intervention against the USSR, the “Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee” obligated the TUC tops to nothing, while allowing them to cloak themselves in the authority of the Russian Revolution. The British general strike of 1926, which erupted in the midst of a powerful miners’ strike, revealed that the TUC had not been transformed into “the organizatory center that embraces the international forces of the proletariat for struggle” as anticipated, but remained a prop of the capitalist order.

Aid sent by Soviet miners to their embattled British counterparts was indignantly rebuffed by the trade-union patriarchs who announced they wanted no “Russian gold.” The cowardly bureaucrats called off the general strike after nine days, just as it was beginning to bite. Trotsky demanded that the Soviets break with the TUC misleaders and ruthlessly criticize their betrayal, but the Comintern chose to maintain its stance of uncritical solidarity with the strikebreakers. A year later, when the

British bureaucrats felt they no longer needed a left cover, they simply walked out of the committee.

Class Collaboration and Bloody Disaster in China

In China the results of the Kremlin's rightist course were even more disastrous. Here the Comintern adopted a "strategy" of liquidating the growing communist movement into the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang (KMT). In 1925 Stalin explained the tasks of the Communists in China as follows:

"In such countries as Egypt or China...the Communists can no longer make it their aim to form a united front against imperialism. In such countries the Communists must pass from the policy of a united national front to the policy of a revolutionary bloc of the workers and petty bourgeoisie. In such countries this bloc may assume the form of a single party of workers and peasants like the Kuomintang...."

—"The Political Tasks of the University of the East,"
quoted in Walter Laqueur, *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East*

From July 1926 to March 1927 China was swept with a massive revolutionary upsurge. In the midst of this, the Chinese Communists were ordered by Moscow *not* to organize soviets and to check their activity in the peasant mobilizations in the countryside in order to maintain good relations with the national bourgeoisie. Trotsky sharply opposed this rightist liquidationist line toward the KMT and noted that:

"All these recipes and even the way they are formulated are cruelly reminiscent of the old Menshevik cuisine. The way out is to draw the line organizationally as the necessary prerequisite for an independent policy, keeping one's eyes, not on the left Kuomintang, but above all, on the awakened workers....The sooner the policy of the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] is turned around the better for the Chinese revolution."

—"The Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang," 1926

But Stalin's main interest in China in this period lay in establishing a diplomatic alliance with the bourgeois regime. To promote this the KMT was admitted to the Communist International as a fraternal party. Trotsky alone among the Soviet leaders voted against this travesty of Leninism. How would the MLP have voted?

In the spring of 1927, as the KMT leadership moved to behead the vanguard of the Chinese proletariat, the Comintern ordered the Communists to lay down their arms in order not to "provoke" their bourgeois allies. The result of class collaboration in China in the twenties was the same as in Spain in the thirties: tens of thousands of the best militants were butchered and the workers movement was shattered.

Stalin Lurches Left: The Third Period

The rightist turn of Soviet foreign policy after the Fifth Congress had its reflection domestically in an orientation to the rich peasants. Stalin's factional ally, Bukharin, told them to "Enrich yourselves" and proposed to move toward socialism in the USSR at a "snail's pace." But the kulaks had no interest in socialism at any speed and by

1927-28 were openly mobilizing for counterrevolution. As befits an advocate of "socialism in one country," Stalin proved much more responsive to challenges to his own regime than setbacks to the international movement. Between the spring and fall of 1928 he moved from a position that the "expropriation of the Kulaks would be folly" to declaring that "We must break down the resistance of that class in open battle" (*Problems of Leninism*).

The result was an abrupt lurch to the left at the Sixth Comintern Congress in 1928. (The fact that the International had not been summoned for four years—under Lenin it had met annually throughout the civil war—indicates the low regard in which it was held by the insular, nationalist Stalin leadership.) Contrary to the MLP, the decisions of the Sixth Congress did not represent the unbroken continuity of "fundamental Leninist principles," but rather a symmetrical deviation to the previous capitulation to the KMT and British trade-union bureaucrats. From prostration before non-proletarian forces, the "general line" became a flat rejection of the possibility of united action with anyone not prepared to accept communist leadership.

The 180 degree line change was "explained" by the proclamation that the class struggle had entered a "Third Period" of post-war history characterized by the final crisis of capitalism and the inevitability of successful revolutionary upheavals everywhere. The "Third Period" was, in Trotsky's apt phrase, "a combination of Stalinist bureaucratism and Bukharinite metaphysics" which bore no relation to the reality of the class struggle in the period. From 1928 to 1932 no communist party on earth was in a position to seriously challenge the rule of its own bourgeoisie. The theory of the "Third Period" was simply a "world-historic" cover for the Kremlin's zigzags.

Third Period policies were a direct repudiation of the principles and tactics carefully elaborated in the first four congresses of the International. The Leninist policy of struggling to build communist leaderships in the existing mass workers organizations was replaced by the sectarian separatism of "red unions." Countless tiny communist "unions," many of them little more than paper organizations, were created and amalgamated in dual-union federations. With this tactic—explicitly denounced by Lenin in "'Left-Wing' Communism—An Infantile Disorder" as "so unpardonable a blunder that it is tantamount to the greatest service Communists could render the bourgeoisie"—the American Communist Party achieved at one blow what the labor bureaucrats and capitalists had been unable to in the course of the post-war anti-Bolshevik hysteria. It got the reds out of the unions and thereby abandoned the masses of workers to the reactionary business unionists of the American Federation of Labor.

Fruits of the 'Third Period': Hitler Crushes the KPD

The most disastrous results of the "Third Period" occurred in Germany where the Communist Party (KPD) labelled the mass Social Democratic Party (SPD)

“social fascist.” Stalin pronounced that “The Social Democracy, objectively speaking, is the moderate wing of fascism.” This effectively ruled out an approach to the SPD leaders for a united front against the rapidly growing Nazi movement. Instead the KPD called for “united fronts from below,” i.e., for social-democratic workers to “unite” with communists under the leadership of the KPD. This naturally had little appeal to the millions of social-democratic workers who were not prepared to admit that they were either “moderate” or “social” fascists. The KPD lost the opportunity to exploit the profound contradiction between the social democracy and the fascists:

“The Social Democracy without the mass organizations of the workers can have no influence. Fascism cannot entrench itself in power without annihilating the workers’ organizations. Parliament is the main arena of the Social Democracy. The system of fascism is based upon the destruction of parliamentarism. For the monopolistic bourgeoisie, the parliamentary and fascist regimes represent only different vehicles of dominion; it has recourse to one or the other, depending upon the historical conditions. But for both the Social Democracy and fascism, the choice of one or the other vehicle has an independent significance; more than that, for them it is a question of political life or death.”

—Trotsky, “What Next?” 1932

In August 1917 the Bolsheviks had exploited a comparable contradiction between Kerensky, the pseudo-socialist head of the pro-imperialist Provisional Government, and Kornilov, a rightist general who sought to topple him. Lenin did not spend his time calling on the workers and soldiers who still had illusions in Kerensky to unite under the banner of Bolshevism, but instead proposed a united front to the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries and the creation of joint organizations of self-defense against their common enemy. In this way the Bolsheviks mobilized the greatest possible forces to crush Kornilov while at the same time winning over many rank and file among Kerensky’s supporters who saw that the communists were the most determined opponents of the counterrevolution.

Trotsky proposed that the KPD approach the SPD for a similar military bloc against fascist terror. He explained how KPD militants should motivate the united front to the SPD rank and file:

“The Bolshevik does not ask the Social Democrat to alter the opinion he has of Bolshevism and of the Bolshevik press. Moreover, he does not demand that the Social Democrat make a pledge for the duration of the agreement to keep silent on his opinion of Communism. Such a demand would be absolutely inexcusable. ‘So long,’ says the Communist, ‘as I have not convinced you and you have not convinced me, we shall criticize each other with full freedom, each using the arguments and expressions he deems necessary. But when the fascist wants to force a gag down our throats, we will repulse him together!’ Can an intelligent Social Democratic worker counter this proposal with a refusal?”

—“The United Front For Defense,” 1933

Instead the KPD showered the SPD ranks with shrill denunciations, hollow ultimatums and empty boasts. One KPD leader declared in the Reichstag: “Let Hitler take office—he will soon go bankrupt, and then it will

be our day.” The criminal sectarianism of the KPD was perhaps most nakedly exposed in Prussia in 1931 when it supported a fascist referendum to remove the SPD-led state government. Imagine the impact which the spectacle of the joint campaign waged by the KPD and the Nazis had on the social-democratic workers! Yet the MLP characterizes these literally suicidal tactics as “a generally correct, Marxist-Leninist line.”

Marxism and Fatalism

In its major piece assessing the Third Period (“Between the Sixth and Seventh Congresses”), the MLP concludes that: “The CI and its parties made advances in their work in this period....The consolidation of the parties in this period probably had much to do with subsequent successes.” What “subsequent successes”—the popular fronts? The MLP is compelled to describe the period of the greatest defeat ever suffered by the working class as one of “advances” and “consolidation” because of its irrational attachment to the Third Period.

The article goes on to acknowledge that: “At the same time, there was also the severe setback of *the Hitler takeover in Germany*, which however *cannot be blamed on errors of the CP of Germany*” (emphasis added). What then *should* it be attributed to? Was the victory of the fascists over the world’s most powerful working-class movement and the strongest communist party *inevitable*? Or does the MLP believe that the triumph of fascist reaction can only be averted in cases where the professional class traitors of the Second International are prepared to offer revolutionary leadership?

The tactics of the KPD were false from beginning to end. Given the profound cowardice and treachery of the social-democratic leaders, who capitulated at every step rather than fight, the impotent sectarianism of the KPD leadership led to the disaster in Germany just as much as the popular-front strategy of the Spanish Communist Party prepared Franco’s victory a half dozen years later.

The assertion that the destruction of the powerful German workers movement *without a shot being fired* cannot be attributed to the mistakes of its historic leadership is both objectivist and profoundly pessimistic. For, if the KPD made no important strategic mistakes, the only conclusion is that the victory of Hitler was inevitable. Trotsky might have had the MLP in mind when he noted that: “As a rule, the vulgarizers of Marx, gravitating towards fatalism, observe nothing on the political arena save objective causes.” The fatalistic optimism of “after Hitler, us” of the Third Period is transformed by the MLP into fatalistic pessimism.

The MLP may not understand the organic connection between the “leftism” of the Sixth Congress and the capitulationism of the Seventh, but Trotsky did. Four years before Dimitrov’s speech, he warned:

“One of those decisive moments in history is closely approaching, when the Comintern, after a series of big but still ‘partial’ mistakes which have undermined and shaken up the forces accumulated in its first five years, risks committing the capital, fatal error which may erase the Comintern as a revolutionary factor from the political map for an entire historic epoch.”

—“Germany, the Key to the International Situation,”
November 1931

The “capital, fatal error” of which he spoke was the disaster in Germany. It led directly to the popular front which did indeed “erase the Comintern from the political map.” The MLP leadership has not undertaken a serious study of the lessons of the German defeat for the same reason that it ignores the lessons of the liquidation of the Chinese CP in 1927—because to do so would shatter the myth of a “Golden Age” of the Stalinist Comintern before the Seventh Congress. This in turn would bring them face to face with the struggle of the Left Opposition against the rightist errors which followed the Fifth Congress and the disastrous “leftism” of the Third Period which preceded and conditioned the craven capitulation of the Popular Front.

One of the mechanisms used by the MLP to dodge a

serious political reckoning with Trotsky—the leader of the only communist opposition to the political destruction of Lenin’s international—has been to cite the betrayals of a variety of revisionist pretenders to Trotskyism. Many of these criticisms are substantially correct, but they no more constitute a critique of Trotskyism than an equivalent list of criticisms of the Communist Party would refute Leninism. Marx once explained to Weitling that ignorance never did anybody any good. In that spirit serious militants in the MLP owe it to themselves to take off their blinders and read Trotsky. Those who do will discover that the thread of authentic communist continuity after Lenin runs through the Left Opposition and through it alone. ■