

Leninism and the Third Period

Not Twins, but Antipodes

In our previous issue we published a critical assessment of the contradictory leftward movement of the formerly Maoist Marxist-Leninist Party (“MLP’s Stalinist Pyrite: The Myth of the Third Period,” 1917 No. 3). The MLP responded in the 20 May *Workers’ Advocate Supplement* (WAS) with a blustering ten-page article entitled “On ‘Bolshevik Tendency’s’ Polemic Against Our Party: Trotskyism Trails in the Wake of Reformism.” This tract (which we will be happy to send to anyone who requests it) blithely ignores the substantive political points raised in the original polemic.

In their 20 June issue the WAS editors congratulate themselves that their reply “has been met with enthusiasm.” They apparently consider it very clever to have ducked all the difficult questions. But, to quote a Scottish proverb of which Lenin was particularly fond, “facts are stubborn children that will not move.” As we pointed out in our last article, the class-collaborationist policies that led to Franco’s victory in the Spanish Civil War were not initiated in 1935, but in 1926-27 with the betrayal of the British General Strike and the Chinese Revolution. For those who refuse to probe beneath the official Stalinist falsifications of Soviet history during the 1920’s, the Comintern’s subsequent betrayals must forever remain an insoluble riddle.

Instead of investigating the historical roots of the Popular Front, the MLP sets itself the sterile task of poring over official transcripts of speeches from the Seventh Congress to discover in this or that formulation of Dimitrov the origins of “revisionism” in the international communist movement. This is like trying to understand contemporary South Korean politics from the resolutions of Chun Doo-hwan’s handpicked National Assembly. The Comintern in Lenin’s time held yearly congresses in which genuine debates took place and real decisions were made. The Comintern of 1935 had not met for seven years and functioned as a rubber stamp for decisions already arrived at in Moscow. Like the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU), it had been strangled by a conservative bureaucracy, headed by Joseph Stalin. This bureaucratic caste had consolidated its power in the Soviet workers state a decade earlier under the banner of “Socialism in One Country.”

‘Socialism in One Country’

Until 1924 it had been an article of faith among Bolsheviks (including Stalin) that socialism could never be built in a single country, let alone in backward Russia. All currents in the party agreed that the final fate of the Russian Revolution was inextricably linked with the progress of revolution worldwide. “Socialism in One Country” expressed the outlook of newly-arisen privileged layers within the Soviet party and state apparatus.

For these “red parvenus,” the international revolution, with its attendant sacrifices and risks, was seen as a threat to the status and material comforts they had only recently acquired. This new cautious and inward-looking mood among Soviet officialdom, moreover, found resonance among broad sections of the Russian masses, exhausted by seven years of revolution and civil war. Stalin’s rise to power represented the triumph of nationalist bureaucratic conservatism over the profoundly internationalist traditions of the October Revolution.

In the field of foreign policy, “Socialism in One Country” meant conciliating imperialism. By Stalin’s logic the imperialist powers would never leave the Soviet Union in peace to construct a nationally self-contained socialism unless convinced that the Comintern no longer posed a threat to the international status quo. The doctrine of peaceful coexistence was enunciated by Stalin in 1927:

“[We must] take into account the contradictions in the imperialist camp, postpone war, buying off the capitalists and take all measures to preserve peaceful relations....

“The basis of our relations with the capitalist countries is the acceptance of the co-existence of two fundamentally different systems...”

—quoted in *Soviet Foreign Policy 1928-1934*, X.J. Eudin, R.M. Slusser (editors)

Stalin could only prove his peaceful intentions to the international bourgeoisie by converting the Comintern into the handmaiden of Soviet diplomacy. All leaders who still regarded it as a revolutionary instrument or insisted on the least degree of independence from the Kremlin had therefore to be purged. This sanitizing of the Comintern, along with the liquidation of the Bolshevik old guard within the USSR, was already an accomplished fact by 1935. The delegates assembled at the Seventh Congress were, in the main, a collection of the most servile and mediocre elements of the national communist party leaderships, distinguished only by their capacity for unquestioning obedience to the Kremlin’s orders.

The Popular Front, far from a mistaken tactic, was integral to the larger Kremlin strategy of seeking an alliance for “collective security” with British and French imperialism against a German war machine with appetites in the East. The Popular Front was initiated not at the Seventh Congress, but with the Stalin-Laval pact (a mutual security agreement between France and the USSR) signed in May 1935. In the years immediately following, Stalin sacrificed the heroic and combative proletariat of Spain on the altar of “collective security.” By artificially confining the Spanish Civil War within bourgeois-democratic limits, and using the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), along with Soviet aid, to suppress all attempts by workers to struggle for their own

class interests, the Kremlin hoped to recommend itself to the capitalist democracies as a worthy anti-German ally.

MLP On Spain: Reinventing the Wheel

From reading “The Collapse of the Spanish Republic” (the final installment of the series on the Spanish Civil War in *WAS*), one could get the impression that the MLP was the first to discover the treachery of the PCE. One would hardly suspect that the betrayals *WAS* refers to had been documented fifty years earlier in the heat of battle. Felix Morrow’s *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain* (1938), Franz Borkenau’s *The Spanish Cockpit* (1937), and George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* (1938)—all tell the same sordid story of liquidation of workers’ organizations in the name of “anti-fascist unity.” Finally, Trotsky’s Spanish writings counterpose to Stalinist class collaboration a clear program of revolutionary class struggle. All these works were widely available in English nearly forty years before the publication of the dispatches of Palmiro Togliatti, on which *WAS* bases its account. Togliatti is, at best, an interesting footnote to the main historical text. To rely exclusively on Stalinist sources for historical information, as the MLP insists on doing, is like accepting only the checks of a convicted forger.

The “anti-fascist unity” line that delivered Spain to Franco also dictated Soviet foreign policy (and hence the politics of CPs throughout the world) for the better part of World War II. In the hope that comrades of the MLP will not spend another forty years unearthing the crimes committed in the name of this policy, we bring to their attention the following facts: 1) the Stalinists in World War II disparaged and frequently collaborated in the suppression of anti-colonial struggles from Ireland to India, from Algeria to Indochina, from Latin America to the Philippines; 2) the Stalinists in the U.S. acted as the most zealous enforcers of Roosevelt’s wartime wage freeze and no-strike pledge (placing themselves to the right of John L. Lewis), enthusiastically supported the incarceration of Japanese-Americans (even to the point of expelling their own members of Japanese origin), and resisted attempts by blacks to protest Jim Crow segregation in the U.S. Army (placing themselves to the right of A. Philip Randolph and the NAACP); and 3) Stalin, in an ultimate gesture of “anti-fascist unity,” disbanded the Comintern altogether in 1943.

The MLP acts like a latter-day seaman who attempts to sail around the world without the benefit of the discoveries of Columbus or Magellan. It insists on viewing the Popular Front and the Spanish events in isolation from their causes and consequences, not out of stupidity, but from willful political blindness. Trotsky’s Spanish writings and the works of his co-thinkers remain to this day on Stalinism’s forbidden index. This is because the main premise of these works is that the Popular Front was not an incidental error, but part of a consistent pattern of class treason which dated back to the 1920’s.

Once this is understood, it becomes necessary to ask whose interests, if not those of the working class, were served by Stalin’s maneuvers. For Marxists, politics are

not ultimately an exercise in free will, but a reflection of the strivings of various social classes and strata. Soviet foreign policy only becomes intelligible when viewed as an expression of the interests of the bureaucratic caste that politically expropriated the Russian proletariat in the 1920’s. But a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. If the MLP wishes to remain Stalinist, it would do better to shut the lid forever on the Pandora’s box of Comintern history.

Roughly twenty years ago the Progressive Labor Party (PL), an American Maoist/Stalinist formation, also began, from a slightly different angle, but with more or less the same intent as the MLP, to question its Stalinist legacy. PL was soon confronted with a choice: either undertake a serious study of Trotsky’s writings or abandon its critical enterprise. It chose the latter course, concluding that all knowledge and learning serves the ruling class. The MLP must either come to grips with the revolutionary program of Trotskyism or wander down PL’s road to political oblivion.

The Origins of the ‘Third Period’

The one point in our polemic the MLP makes some pretense of responding to is the record of the German Communist Party (KPD) during Hitler’s rise to power. This is a chapter of Comintern history in which the MLP should take considerable interest, since the KPD was both the foremost practitioner and chief victim of the Comintern’s “Third Period” line which is held in deep sentimental regard by all left Stalinists. At first glance the maximalist slogans and policies of those years—with all the triumphal phrases about capitalism’s “ultimate crisis,” the proletariat’s “final offensive,” and the attempts to organize “red trade unions”—appear more attractive than the groveling class-collaborationism which preceded and then ultimately replaced them. But it is necessary to understand the integral connection between reformism and ultra-leftism.

In the mid-1920’s the Stalin faction in the CPSU was not nearly as powerful as it was later to become, and possessed no coherent program of its own. Stalin’s sole objective was to preserve and extend his power base in the party. To defeat the Left Opposition, headed by Trotsky, Stalin allied himself with the CPSU’s right wing, whose chief spokesman was Nikolai Bukharin. The policies pursued under this “center-right bloc,” which lasted from 1926 to 1928, led to a series of disasters on both foreign and domestic fronts, all of which had been foreseen and warned against by the Left Opposition (the defeat of the British General Strike of 1926 and of the Chinese Revolution of 1927, and the grain procurement crisis in the USSR in 1928). As a result, Stalin turned upon Bukharin and denounced the rightist policies that he had championed only months before.

To arm itself against Bukharin and guard its left flank against the vindicated criticisms of the Left Opposition, the Stalin faction took the opportunity of the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern in 1928 to proclaim the onset of the “Third Period” of imminent revolution in every country around the world. This abrupt lurch to the left was dictated by the factional necessity to cover past

failures, and bore no relation to the objective balance of class forces. By far the heaviest price paid for this ultra-leftist posturing was the defeat of the world's most powerful working class by the Nazis in 1933.

Defending the Indefensible

The Left Opposition insisted that the most urgent task confronting the German proletariat in the early 1930's was not the immediate seizure of power, but crushing the burgeoning fascist movement. To this end Trotsky advocated that the KPD, without for a moment abandoning its criticisms of social-democratic reformism, approach the SPD with a proposal for joint action against the fascists. If the SPD leadership failed to respond positively to such a united-front proposal, it would stand exposed in the eyes of millions of social-democratic workers—many of whom could then be won to the banner of the KPD. The MLP attacks the Left Opposition's proposal by setting up a straw man: it claims that the united front was somehow predicated upon the SPD leadership's willingness to fight the Nazis. It proceeds to knock down this straw man by reeling off a list of social-democratic leaders who did not resist the Nazi onslaught.

This is a willful distortion of the Trotskyist position. The Left Opposition never argued that the SPD leadership could be counted on to fight the fascists. It simply pointed out that the SPD, despite its reformist leadership, was a multi-millioned workers organization that the Nazis were sworn to destroy. This objective contradiction between social democracy and national socialism meant that social-democratic workers had a common interest with the KPD in defending themselves against Hitler's storm troopers. How else can the MLP explain the February 1934 armed rising of the Austrian social-democratic workers against fascist terror and the rightist Dollfuss government?

In the event, the KPD responded to the Nazi menace with a series of orthodox-sounding excuses for inaction. In December of 1931, as the Nazi juggernaut gathered speed, KPD leader Ernst Thaelmann was filling the pages of *Die Internationale*, with denunciations of, "liberal tendencies to counterpose fascism to bourgeois democracy, Hitler's party to the social fascists" (quoted in "The Tragedy of the German Proletariat," Georg Jungclas). By dubbing the SPD the "left wing of fascism," the KPD in effect demanded that the social-democratic ranks break with their leadership as a precondition for collaboration.

As Trotsky never tired of pointing out, a revolutionary party which demands that the masses accept its entire program in advance, effectively forgoes any possibility of winning them in the course of living struggle. Ultra-leftism often provides an ideological cover for political abstentionism, no less harmful than reformist cowardice. The sectarian bombast of the KPD helped pave the way to the Nazi slaughterhouse.

Trotsky's proposal for stopping Hitler was drawn directly and explicitly from the Bolsheviks' successful struggle against the attempted reactionary coup by General Kornilov in late August 1917. Members of the MLP

who can think, and who know anything about the history of the Russian Revolution, should consider Lenin's tactical military alliance (i.e., united front) with Kerensky and the Mensheviks against Kornilov. Was Kerensky less cowardly or treacherous than the SPD leaders? Does the MLP think that Lenin abandoned "the actual class struggle in favor of liberal dreams about the reformists...taking up struggle on behalf of the working class" by forming this bloc? If not, then what possible objection could there be to applying the same tactic in Germany with the SPD?

There is a chain of causation—errors compounded by errors—which connects the class collaborationism preceding the Third Period to the class collaborationism which followed in its train. The capitulation to Chiang Kai-shek and the defeat of the Chinese Revolution in 1927 led to the "left" turn of the late 1920's which ended in the victory of Hitler. This in turn precipitated the popular-front strategy of kowtowing to the "progressive wing" of the bourgeoisie. It is no accident that the MLP must draw the line at 1935 and insist that everything that went before is unexceptionable. Stalinism thrives on historical ignorance.

MLP vs. Lenin on Regroupment

Most of the WAS reply consisted of a barrage of charges about the BT's current work in the Bay Area. Some of these allegations are so malicious and disingenuous that they do not merit a serious response (e.g., the assertion that, "The BT apparently believes that dedication, courage and self-sacrifice are not needed for the revolution"). But the bulk of the MLP's criticisms are more politically substantive.

The MLP rejects our conception of revolutionary regroupment—that many of the cadres of a future mass revolutionary party will be recruited from left splits in reformist and centrist organizations. The MLP imagines that always and everywhere revolutionary organizations must be built by a process of simple linear recruitment of raw individuals to small pre-existing propaganda groups. It bristles at our assertion that a central task of genuine Marxists in Nicaragua today is to struggle for the creation of a network of workers councils (or soviets) embracing *all* the trade unions and workers organizations. Such a formation could provide both an arena for the political recomposition of the Nicaraguan workers movement and an organizational framework for working-class rule. But for the MLP, the central task is to recruit individuals one by one to its sister organization (the PMLN).

Our conception of how the crisis of proletarian leadership can be successfully resolved is hardly original. The cadres of the Bolshevik Party were assembled largely through the long factional struggle within the Russian social-democratic movement. Lenin's party did not triumph in October 1917 by recruiting ones and twos in isolated "work with the individual activists under the influence of the reformists" as the MLP advocates. Only through open political struggle with the Mensheviks and other "moderate" socialists *in the soviets*—the arena where the shop-floor representatives of the whole class

met to consider what direction to take—did the Bolsheviks win over the majority of the proletariat.

Similarly, the Communist International was created by *splitting* the parties of the Second International and regrouping the subjectively revolutionary elements behind a new banner. To the Leninist strategy of international regroupment, the MLP can only counterpose “having faith in the strength of independent revolutionary organization [and] the ‘gradualism’ of building its ties among the masses and of carrying out actions.”

United Fronts in the Unions

The *Workers’ Advocate Supplement* attacks our record in the 11-day boycott of South African cargo aboard the *Nedlloyd Kimberley* in 1984, initiated and, in part, led by our supporters. They chastise us for participating in a bloc with union supporters of the Communist Party to lead the action. We are also criticized for reporting that several black Democratic congressmen endorsed the action. Presumably the MLP thinks that the correct tactic would have been to refuse to cooperate with either the CP or the black politicians. This is completely congruent with the tactics of the Third Period—and completely wrong.

We knowingly entered a bloc with CP supporters and others in the union because we wanted to see the action take place, and we did not have the forces to pull it off by ourselves. We did not reject the endorsement of the boycott by the black Democratic congressmen—the publicity they generated objectively aided the struggle. That’s their contradiction, not ours.

We conceded nothing to either the Democrats or the CP politically and openly criticized both throughout the struggle. When it came to the crunch, and the union was slapped with a federal court injunction, the Democrats were long gone and the CP capitulated. So we had to contend with them as well as the cops. But we would never refuse to work with people who are prepared to go even part of the way to carry out an action so clearly in the interests of the black South African masses. As Lenin remarked in *What Is To Be Done?*: “Only those who are not sure of themselves can fear to enter into temporary alliances even with unreliable people.”

According to *WAS*, our desire to win official union approval for the action is proof that, “BT’s strategy is that, as the masses rise, the labor bureaucrats will play an important role on the side of the workers.” The MLP seems to have no sense of the contradiction which the boycott posed for the bureaucrats of this largely black local. They could not come out against it, yet they did not want to be associated with it. The question for revolutionists was how to exploit this contradiction to maximize the possibilities of success for this action, the first political strike in West Coast maritime since World War II.

Had it been possible to mobilize enough sentiment in the base to force the union leadership to sanction the action officially, militants in the local could have demanded that the full resources of the ILWU be used to bring out the rest of the labor movement, as well as the black community, in active support. There is a lot of

anti-apartheid sentiment in the Bay Area and, had it been properly tapped, the employers’ injunction could have been defeated. Conversely, if the local union leaders had defied the wishes of the rank-and-file, and refused to come out in open support, or were seen to be dragging their feet, it would have provided an opportunity for class-struggle militants to expose them. Thus the fight to put the union officially on record in support of the boycott was integral to both winning this struggle and exposing the pro-capitalist policies of the bureaucrats to the workers. Whether it be learned negatively in Germany on a large scale, or from the positive example of the Bay Area boycott on a much smaller scale, the lesson is the same: it is in action, and not with high-sounding phrases that the reformist misleaders must be exposed before the working class.

The CIO: ‘Labor’s Giant Step’

The MLP asserts that we are “absolutely wrong” to argue that the split John L. Lewis initiated in the AFL in the 1930’s, which gave birth to the CIO, “gave enormous impetus to industrial unionism on this continent.” For these born-again Third Period loyalists, the American trade-union brass was, and is, one monolithic reactionary mass. The MLP is unable to comprehend the deeply *contradictory* nature of the formation of the CIO, seeing it only as a means by which the labor revolt “was channelled into tame, pro-capitalist unions.” But the creation of industrial unions in the mass-production industries, regardless of Lewis’ intent, sparked the most important step forward for American labor in its history. The CIO was forged in mass class battles which brought hundreds of thousands of working-class militants into political life for the first time.

The Communist Party, the largest radical group in the country at the time, was unfortunately the main beneficiary of this tremendous opening for revolutionary politics. Following Moscow’s instructions, it supported Roosevelt and his “New Deal” Democratic Party and then shoved the “no-strike pledge” down the throats of American workers during World War II. But the CP’s treachery doesn’t change the fact that the battle for industrial unionism was a major step forward for the American working class. The Trotskyists of the then-revolutionary Socialist Workers Party threw themselves into this struggle wherever they got a chance, and we proudly stand in that tradition.

The wisdom of the Third Period boils down to the proposition that every united front not dominated by the revolutionary party is counterrevolutionary. Consequently, it is necessary to wait until the revolutionary vanguard has the majority in any particular section of the class before attempting to initiate mass actions. Since it is impossible to gain a majority through one by one recruitment, the revolutionary party will never have a majority, and therefore never be able to take the lead in mass actions. In theory this should pose an insoluble dilemma for a very small group of Third Period devotees. The MLP gets around the problem through the simple expedient of discarding its troublesome theory

whenever it sniffs a practical “party-building” opportunity.

Opportunism and Sectarianism: 'Not Antipodes, but Twins'

The MLP lightly dismisses the creation of the CIO, a milestone in the struggle for the emancipation of labor in this country. But it measures the contemporary campus-based anti-apartheid movements by a different yardstick. Here we see the opportunist side of the sectarian coin. Gone is the “leftist” tactical rigidity and the Third Period formulas. Instead of wholesale denunciation, the MLP tags right along behind the students—thereby implicitly endorsing the liberal, utopian demand that the capitalist corporations and university trustees pursue a more “progressive” investment policy.

In theory the MLP shares our position that the student movement must forge links with the proletariat, through the medium of a Leninist party. But in the anti-apartheid movement on campus, the MLP soft-pedaled any criticisms it had of the divestment strategy so as not to alienate the students. We told the students the truth: that the law of value, not abstract morality, dictates capitalist investment policy, and that to be effective, the struggle against the apartheid regime had to be brought into the organized working class. On this basis we were able to establish a principled working relationship with the main campus anti-apartheid group at Berkeley. In March 1986 we carried out a joint action based on this perspective on the docks in San Francisco (see *1917* No. 2).

While individual MLPers have on occasion characterized the divestment strategy as a “sham,” the *WAS* polemic attacks us for “denounc[ing] the divestment demand in itself as automatically liberal and reformist.” To this we plead guilty. Calling on American capitalists to juggle their stock portfolios and cleanse themselves of association with their South African ally and junior partner is an exercise in utopian moralism. The MLP theoreticians seem stung by our criticism of their opportunist willingness to go along with the divestment sham. To

get off the hook they try to obscure the vital distinction between labor solidarity actions and student campaigns aimed at pressuring millionaire business tycoons and university trustees to “divest.” In a particularly crude and stupid bit of confusionism, *WAS* argues that labor boycotts of South African cargo aim:

“to force the shipping companies and dock authorities to refuse South African cargo. Are such big capitalists any more moral than the others? If BT wants to say something nice about a struggle, it calls it an ‘effective solidarity action’. But if BT dislikes it, it is an attempt to make the imperialists act morally.”

We can’t believe the MLP is really unable to tell the difference between student appeals to the capitalists to act “morally,” and direct working-class action by longshoremen who get fired for refusing to handle apartheid cargo.

Leninism or Stalinism?

For communists, theory and practice are inseparable. “Theories” such as the MLP’s fairy tale about the glories of the Stalinist Comintern in the Third Period, which can only be defended by glossing over major historical events which do not fit, are not worth much. Likewise, a theory of how to intervene in the mass movement which must be routinely discarded in practice, should cause its adherents to start asking some questions.

Bad politics are not cost-free. The MLP can no more escape the contradictions of Third Period politics than the Communist International could. The first step for those in the MLP who are serious about understanding the political collapse of the Third International must be to study the political debates in the 1920’s which split Lenin’s Political Bureau. Two fundamental tendencies emerged from that struggle—the Left Opposition headed by Trotsky and the conservative bloc of Stalin/Bukharin. While the Left Opposition fought for international proletarian revolution, Stalin/Bukharin banked on building “Socialism in One Country” at a snail’s pace. Those same two tendencies represent the alternatives for the subjective communists in the MLP today—Leninism or Stalinism. ■