

A Course Correction for Maoism in the U.S.

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This statement follows several months of involvement in a workplace struggle, an experience that has greatly informed our engagement with Maoism as well as with the Maoist left. Even in this early stage of our work, the need to unite with other struggles and forces on the left is clear. Dialectically relating the particular and the universal is necessary to advance Maoist politics. We encourage all who aspire to a principled proletarian politics to begin the conversation by mailing us questions and comments at massproletariat@riseup.net (PGP key). We eagerly solicit principled engagement, in particular criticism where relevant. This is vital to advance the process of party building in the U.S.

In the last few years we have seen the emergence of nearly a dozen collectives in the U.S. which aspire to promote Maoist politics. This is a necessary break from bourgeois revisionist trends that have historically acted like daggers in the backs of the masses. While this turn towards Maoism is a positive development, we must intervene to address various deviations in the U.S. Maoist left. If these deviations are left unchecked, they will work to conceal Marxism-Leninism-Maoism behind walls of ignorance and dogmatism.

The Maoist left in the United States understands the need to build the foundation of proletarian power. However, at present there is a lack of clarity on how to carry out this task. This confusion is the result of the lack of a revolutionary pole, analogous to that which existed prior to Deng Xiaoping's counter-revolution in 1976, capable of orienting and inspiring advanced elements of the masses. In this vacuum of mass support for communist politics, many comrades are disoriented about how to apply the lessons of past revolutions in the present situation. Instead, the default tendency is to suspend disbelief, and imagine that because of a nominal adherence to Maoism as 'correct and universal' the people's liberation army is bound to materialize at any moment, or that the establishment of base areas is around the corner.

This idealist evaluation of our present situation is rooted in the notion that revolutionary advance is simply a matter of a ritualistic practice rather than a struggle that passes through the fire of principled criticism and material analysis. This error is the result of a failure to grasp and apply foundational principles of

Maoism. As such, we call for our movement to undergo a course correction that shows the basis for navigation is not a Maoist aesthetic (punchy though it may be), but rather the firm and diligent application of fundamental principles.

1) The Importance of the Subjective

Revolutionary politics are not simply the result of objective processes and historical necessity. The development of revolutionary politics is a dialectical interrelation of objective processes and subjective interventions which work to transform the objective situation. Communists need to be clear about this so that we can avoid idealist and religious notions of political development. At every moment, the class struggle is composed of many interrelated contradictions. By grasping the primary contradiction of a political situation and the principal aspect of that contradiction communists are able to act to advance the class struggle. This is what is meant by ‘No investigation, no right to speak’. In a political situation correct action to advance the class struggle is not possible without careful investigation.

The subjective is the militant political consciousness carried forward by communists and the mass movement. This is consciousness of the basis for proletarian power, and of the basis for interventions which build this power. Sustaining the subjective aspect of Maoist politics is as important as sustaining the objective aspects. Without proletarian subjective force, revisionism is inevitable. To carry forward the militant proletarian subjectivity needed to sustain and grow proletarian power, there are two deviations which must be struggled against.

a) Combat Dogmatism

The first deviation is being ‘subjective and arbitrary’. Comrades making these errors minimize or even dismiss the importance of understanding the objective situation. This leads them to assume that change can follow from their subjective will alone. This can result in left-adventurism, and actions out of step with the development of the objective situation (i.e. engaging in an insurrection without sufficient forces to seize state power).

There is a basis for establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat and then struggling for communist relations of production, but one cannot will the necessary conditions for a successful revolution into being. There are objective factors that impede the creation of mass organizations that can challenge the current system. Communists cannot organize in ignorance of these objective conditions. This sort of dogmatism at best leads to setbacks, and at worst, to defeat.

To combat subjective dogmatism, communists must grasp that different contradictions become primary at different times. For example during the anti-Japanese war, there was a basis for a united front in China against the Japanese imperialists. Additionally, the semi-feudal, semi-capitalist, and semi-colonial

nature of China provided the basis for China's peasantry to serve as a revolutionary class. The correct understanding of these objective conditions allowed the Maoist-led wing of the CCP to further the proletarian movement, despite opposition from dogmatists of all stripes.

b) Combat Empiricism

The second deviation is empiricism. Comrades making these errors overemphasize the importance of the form of appearance of contradictions; when investigating a situation they operate by the principle 'what you see is what you get'. Because they do not analyze the internal contradictions of situations these comrades do not grasp the essence of the situations that they investigate. These empiricists remain blind to the fact that objective difficulties may be transformed through subjective interventions. Instead they focus on engaging people and political movements 'where they are at'. We need to appreciate that social relations and political situations are not static nor are they defined by simple quantitative increase or decrease. Instead, they are defined by a process of development and fundamental transformation.¹

Communists cannot dismiss the form of appearance, but we must go beyond this form to understand the internal contradictions which determine people and political situations. It is only by doing so that we can promote the advanced but dispersed ideas of the masses. Many comrades who do not understand this engage in right-opportunism. They promote the backwards and reformist ideas of the masses because they do not take the time to investigate the internal contradictions within the mass movement. This liquidates the possibility of intervening to put forward a proletarian politics and furthering the development of a revolutionary orientation amongst the masses. This is why communists cannot simply show up to a 'Fight for \$15!' rally and consider their work done for the day.

This is not to say that we as communists should not attend such rallies. There are times when we should, but instead of presenting ourselves as uncritical 'allies' we must seek to identify the contradictions at play. Investigating the contradictions within reformist rallies provides the basis for comrades to intervene to concentrate the advanced ideas of the masses. Even at a backwards rally, many workers will grasp key contradictions such as those between them and their bosses. By building links with the workers and utilizing the mass line, comrades can push workers to fight for more than 'fifteen'. If we fail to correctly identify contradictions and instead accept the bureaucratic concealment of divisions within these movements we will play the role of the bourgeois state: promoting the backwards and reformist ideas of the masses and accepting the continuation of the current social order.

To combat empiricism, communists must grasp that internal contradictions constitute the basis for change. Without a concrete understanding of the internal

¹See Mao's essay *On Practice* for more on this topic: marxists.org

contradictions in a situation, it is impossible to discern the means by which to advance the class struggle. Stalin failed to grasp this crucial materialist principle. Later, the revisionist Krushchev clique cemented the implications of this omission through policies that promoted restoration of bourgeois dictatorship within the Soviet Union. Both attributed the contradictions within the USSR to external factors such as capitalist infiltrators. Stalin's errors led to Krushchev's revisionism which led to the restoration of capitalism and the destruction of the USSR. Mao wrote about this in a 1964 editorial²:

As the Soviet Union was the first, and at the time the only, country to build socialism and had no foreign experience to go by, and as Stalin departed from Marxist-Leninist dialectics in his understanding of the laws of class struggle in socialist society, he prematurely declared after agriculture was basically collectivized that there were "no longer antagonistic classes" in the Soviet Union and that it was 'free of class conflicts', one-sidedly stressed the internal homogeneity of socialist society and overlooked its contradictions, failed to rely upon the working class and the masses in the struggle against the forces of capitalism, and regarded the possibility of restoration of capitalism as associated only with armed attack by international imperialism. This was wrong both in theory and in practice.

In addition, Stalin took class origin to be all important. He failed to appreciate that people can change their class allegiance and perspective.

2) The Primacy of Class Stand

The active role one takes in a struggle, or class stand, is not reducible to structural class. Structural class includes both social class (determined by relationship to class exploitation, national oppression, patriarchy and other factors) as well as class origin. This is a core tenet of MLM. Through understanding the primacy of the subjective in overcoming contradictions it becomes clear that class stand is primary. As Jiang Qing said in 1966³:

'Family background makes an imprint on one's development, but it doesn't play a decisive role. It's one's efforts, the revolutionization of consciousness that is ultimately determinant.'

Here Jiang Qing is opposing the 'born red' theory, which was popular at the dawn of the GPCR. Adherents of this theory claimed that Red Guards and cadre who were said to be 'born red' – those whose parents were involved in the Chinese revolution – inherently had a more correct political line overall. Jiang Qing's opposition to this form of idealism is based on its conflation of social class and political class. Her argument is that instead of asking 'who are

²See Mao's editorial in Hongqi from 1964: marxists.org

³Jiang Qing "Receives Beijing Middle School Student Representatives to Discuss Class Line" November, 14, 1966, (), PDF.

your parents?’, communists should ask each other, ‘what are you doing to build proletarian power?’.

In the January Storm in Shanghai during the GPCR, millions of the masses were galvanized to the project of revolution. However, even in this revolutionary situation the masses were not entirely unified, and revisionist factions developed in the working class. Forks in the road will necessitate divisions and regroupings all the way until communism.

In the present situation, in which there is no clear revolutionary pole, it is of primary importance to not see the masses as an undivided group. In the US, the working class is divided by patriarchy, white supremacy (the form of US imperialism), as well as by other contradictions. Some members of the working class can and do put forward a bourgeois and reactionary political line. Therefore, it is imperative that communists understand the primacy of class stand and avoid fetishizing social class or class origin. Of course, social class does have a relation to one’s political stand, but it is not the determining factor.

a) Oppose Workerism, Oppose Identity Politics

Many U.S. Maoists correctly oppose identity politics as a form of idealism. However, in some cases, this recognition has led to comrades falling into a form of workerism. These comrades fail to realize that workerism and identity politics share the idealist assumption that structural factors determine political stand. Identity politics posits that the correctness of one’s political line is inversely related to the amount of oppression that one faces. Similarly, workerism posits that the correctness of one’s political line is related directly to one’s relationship to commodity production, often overlooking even important distinctions regarding forms of surplus value extraction, not to mention the primacy of political action.

As a tendency, workerism is not reducible to idealizing the point of production (i.e. the factory). Conceiving of the masses as an undifferentiated whole capable of spontaneously resolving all contradictions is another form of workerism. This deviation has led some U.S. Maoists to incorrectly claim that forms of oppression such as patriarchy and white supremacy are merely parlor tricks of the bourgeoisie. This effectively disavows the material reproduction of various forms of oppression by the working class itself. It also leads comrades to falsely claim that members of the working class gain no material benefits from these various forms of oppression.

We must be clear: identity politics names real forms of oppression. However, because it lacks a materialist analysis, identity politics cannot formulate an effective practice to challenge the basis of oppression. Thus it lapses into liberalism, proscribing recognition and reform where we need revolutionary advance.

Communists must look beyond the apparent contradiction between these two deviations and grasp their essential shared idealism. Both workerism and iden-

tity politics privilege structural determinations over political stand. Thus, these forms of dogmatism are unable to provide a basis for militant communist subjectivity.

3) Class Stand and the Resistance to National Oppression

While there is no direct correspondence between structural determination and class stand, there is a relation. We take seriously the axiom ‘Where there is oppression, there is resistance’. Of course, not all resistance to oppression is the same, and communists must work to differentiate resistance that is essentially reformist from resistance with a revolutionary character. In the contemporary U.S. many people experience extreme and concentrated national oppression. Given the importance of this force in the maintenance and reproduction of capitalist social relations in the U.S., there is a need for Maoists to join the resistance to the system of white supremacy and utilize the mass line to advance the struggle. In order to do this, it is necessary to investigate both the objective and subjective conditions of this resistance so that we can see the essential contradictions and discern the basis for building proletarian power.

Currently there is mass resistance to black national oppression in the form of the Movement for Black Lives (MBL). Some wrongly dismiss this resistance as completely consolidated to a reformist line. These comrades focus on reformist statements made by various leaders of MBL, but fail to investigate the contradictions within the mass movement. This failure prevents comrades from seeing the revolutionary ideas within MBL that are often in contradiction with the dominant articulations. Once this is understood it becomes clear that there is a basis for revolutionary transformation within the movement. We cannot wait for the appearance of a ‘pure’ mass movement. Instead, we must act to concentrate the advanced ideas of those who are already resisting oppression.⁴

4) Why ‘Dare to Struggle; Dare to Win’ Means You!

Pause and think for a moment. Are you searching for a better organization or ideology to ‘sign-up’ for? Are you passively waiting for instructions? We have

⁴Historically, the Revolutionary Union (RU) in the U.S. failed to employ this strategy during the ‘Boston Bussing’ issue in 1974. This was, in part, due to the fact that the RU conceived of white supremacy as a parlor trick used by the bourgeoisie to divide the working class. Thus when the bussing issue came to a head, the RU argued that blacks and whites should oppose the integration of formally all-white schools by claiming that it was an attempt by the bourgeoisie to divide the multi-national proletariat. As such, the RU remained blind to the basis for white supremacist ideology within the working class itself. This basis was evident when many members of the white working class played a leading role in the violent attacks against black people. The RU’s understanding of white supremacy clearly negated the Maoist principle of the primacy of internal contradictions. In contrast to the RU, a correct approach would have been to join the struggles of blacks against white supremacy, while simultaneously promoting the black liberation struggle among the white proletariat.

all fallen into this trap at some point. Bourgeois ideology places us in roles within the social division of labor, and it is all too easy to passively accept this. But as Maoists we must strive to break free of such chains!

Political organization is a weapon of proletarian power which is divided internally by the two line struggle. The unity of communist political organizations cannot be built through a nominal adherence to ‘Maoism’ as a brand; those who claim otherwise ignore the possibility of ‘waving the red flag to oppose the red flag’. Principled political unity is a process of struggle, criticism, and transformation. As communists we must be both the hammer and the nail, working to transform both ourselves and the world.

At this moment there is a need for Maoist forces in the U.S. to engage in serious ideological exchange and line struggle. This cannot happen on social media forums (which are platforms for state surveillance), text messages, or a few conversations among individuals. Instead, Maoist political organizations in the U.S. must utilize secure communication and in-person group meetings to struggle, criticize, and transform. Only in this manner will we be able to build principled political unity and take concrete steps towards aligning ‘thinking and doing’ and forming an MLM party in the U.S.

5) Against Purity

Many in the U.S. who nominally adhere to Maoism actually put into practice a politics of supposed purity, which is opposed to Maoist mass line politics. This typically manifests in reductionist ideas of the distinction between friends and enemies based on adherence to the ‘brand’ of Maoism and/or the social class of members of the masses. We must call this what it is: an idealist politics of purity that negates the need for two-line struggle at all times. Against these forms of idealism, comrades must understand that one can never ensure that they are automatically on the correct side of the class struggle due to structural determination or nominal adherence to a political trend. Again, it is one’s efforts and actions that are primary in class stand, not one’s social class or adherence to Maoism as ‘correct and universal’.

Parallel to such discursive posturing are the actions of those who claim that one’s practice guarantees a revolutionary correctness. This leads organizations, such as the Maoist Communist Group of New York, to claim that their latest practice provides a pure break from past mistakes. In line with this, these groups posit that expelling problematic members is the extent of necessary struggle against backwards trends. When groups like these encounter the inevitable setbacks that occur in political work, they avoid a materialist analysis of success and failure. Any admission of failure would dissolve the consistency of their political fantasy. This is a clear negation of the materialist cycle of knowledge that Mao lays out in ‘On Practice’.

Other organizations defend political work which, in content, is the same as charity, as being beyond critique. They claim that that this sort of engagement with the masses will eventually lead to the creation of base areas. These groups do not understand the need to differentiate between the advanced, intermediate, and backwards members of the masses. In opposition to these idealist deviations, there is a need to expand both the scope and quality of political work among the masses. We must also expand principled discussion and struggle between Maoist forces in different locales. Serious ideological struggle and comradely criticisms between groups are the preconditions of building a MLM party in the U.S. There is limited time in a day, and only so many years in a life. In order to make concrete gains, we must cast aside all illusions of purity, struggle to grasp our strengths and shortcomings, and learn from our past failures. Internally, this takes the form of principled democratic centralism. Only through this process can we build a proletarian political force capable of establishing a DoP. The abandonment of democratic centralism in favor of pure centralism results in the promotion of supposed experts detached from the concrete needs of the proletarian movement. This has and remains an Achilles heel of the Maoist movement in the US. Even in 1971, Bob Avakian was introduced to members of the Revolutionary Union as ‘the man who will lead the revolution in America’,⁵ and that was at a time when the group was a far cry from the backwards party it became and remains. In the recent experiences of the NCP(LC) and MCG(NY), a similar phenomenon of self-declared leaders developed, divorced from the actual needs of organizations and of the class struggle. Rather than fantasizing about who will be the people to lead a revolution, the emphasis should fall on the theory and practice needed to advance revolutionary development now.

6) The Mass Line, Theory, and Practice

Revisionism and bourgeois ideology share a core belief that political thought exists external to the actual class struggle. They posit that there is a non-dialectical relationship between theory and practice (even if they nominally uphold the dialectic), with theory being introduced into political practice from the outside. This results from a failure to grasp that it is in the particular that the universal resides, so that it is simply not possible to develop correct theoretical positions except through joining and furthering mass struggles. In this sense, hierarchical bureaucracies and ‘horizontal’ affinity groups are two sides of the same coin. Against these two deviations, Maoists must see political organization as the basis for dialectically relating theory to practice in politics and concentrating the correct ideas of the masses.

Anarchists, Trotskyists, and bourgeois politicians are not the only ones who practice this deviation. There are some groups who, while claiming to be Maoist, actually practice revisionism. The mutterings of the Maoist Communist Group of New York are an important example that cadres should learn from so that

⁵Correspondence former member of the Revolutionary Union, September 12, 2016.

they can avoid similar backwards practices. In the document *On Maoist Practice*⁶ they put forward a conception of the mass line which divorces theory from practice. They say that a ‘mass line’ only intersects with a ‘class line’ at key moments, and that the ‘class line’ can only be developed by a political organization, and not by the masses themselves. At a basic level, this viewpoint implies that the masses do not have class ideas, and that the masses exist only insofar as they have a relationship to a ‘class organization’. The NY-MCG thus promotes a non-dialectical relationship between theory and practice. They condescend to the masses, whom they relegate to a totally instrumental role, implying that if the masses have too much engagement with communists or communist organization it will exhaust their ‘pure’ initiative.

Tailing the masses is not the mass line. Comrades who make this error fail to recognize internal divisions within the masses themselves: naively tailing the masses necessarily means reproducing the backwards ideas that sections of the masses are putting forward. Instead of fetishizing the masses, we must see that ‘class struggle is the key link’⁷. The masses have correct ideas, but not for mystical reasons. The involvement of the masses in concrete sites of struggle is the basis for their formation of correct political ideas about how to fight for proletarian advances. A crucial part of the mass line is the process of struggling to identify the correct ideas which must be promoted, and the backwards ideas which must be isolated and struggled against.

Maoists must oppose all who argue for a purely formal unity among the masses, or for the bureaucratic separation of the masses from revolutionaries. These deviations are common in backwards organizations of all stripes, whether Maoist in name only, Trotskyist, left-communist, or Avakianist. All of these backwards tendencies functionally promote the understanding that class ideas are synthesized separately from actual politics by a self-appointed ‘leadership’. This approach is a negation of the mass line. In order to avoid these deviations, Maoists must fuse with the masses, investigate their situation, and work to identify divisions internal to various mass movements. This provides the basis for working with the advanced members of the masses to bring along the intermediate and isolate the backwards in a particular situation. It is only through concentrating the correct class ideas of the masses that we can apply the universal lessons of Maoism in particular political situations. The mass line is not simply a tool or accessory to this process. It is the means by which we can dialectically relate theory to practice and thus spur mass initiative. Politics without the mass line is simply revisionism. With it, our struggles advance towards revolution and communism.

⁶<https://maoistcommunistgroup.com/documents/>

⁷massline.org

7) The Need for the Party and the DoP

We are opposed to all of the forces of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, which is a regime that uses democratic formalisms to conceal its oppressive and exploitative nature. The masses' rage and resistance to this oppression, by itself, is not able to build proletarian power. A revolutionary party will provide the basis for sustained gains, but gains within this system are not enough. The masses together with a revolutionary organization can achieve victories in the course of the class struggle. However, unless the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie is toppled, the state will smash proletarian power and subvert revolutionary ideology. This undeniable fact, which members of the masses have, do, and will grasp, cuts a path from the present to the victory of the proletariat in the establishment of its dictatorship, and eventually in its victory over all oppressive relations in the realization of communism.

The experiences of the Paris Commune, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Chinese Revolution show that when the state power of the bourgeoisie is defeated, society opens up, and the masses begin to methodically break all chains. The dictatorship of the proletariat is dialectically linked to the democracy of the masses⁸. A necessary function of the DoP is the repression of class enemies. Through the DoP the vast majority of the people are united in their efforts to overcome the basis of oppression and exploitation. By promoting mass participation in the class struggle, the democracy of the masses provides the basis for winning over and transforming those who are opposed to the proletarian revolution. The party and the DoP are vehicles for transforming social relations. In the U.S. today there is no Maoist party and we live under the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. At present we lack the means to build proletarian power capable of overthrowing the current ruling class. Therefore it is a principal political task for us to build a Maoist party that can work towards the establishment of the DoP.

8) Link Up!

To advance, we must promote prolonged and ongoing ideological exchange and discussion among emerging Maoist forces about political practice and theory. This process is not organic. It cannot be left to chance. It must be planned, scheduled, and methodically approached in relationship to the needs of the moment. This development cannot take place on a Facebook forum. It needs to be a concerted effort in which time is made amongst comrades in different locales to struggle over foundational issues. Eventually, this practice will need to expand on a mass scale, in which every town and city in America will have a place people can go to learn about Maoist political practice and share experiences, in the spirit of the great link-ups of the Red Guards during the GPCR. The spread of this practice will contribute to the founding of a Maoist communist party in

⁸See *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat is Dictatorship by the Masses*: massline.org

the U.S. The central argument of this essay is that there is a need for Maoist forces to link up.

It is about time. Seize the time.