

*The article below is reprinted simply to show an example of the disruptive work of COUSML in its international work. It is not meant to comment on the Guardian newspaper or Dan Connell's views on the "left" danger, or even on the Eritrean struggle as a whole.*

From *Guardian*  
December 15, 1979

## **Eritrea support and the 'left' danger**

By DAN CONNELL

A year ago I was reporting in the *Guardian* the tactical withdrawal of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) from the principal Eritrean towns in the face of a massive Soviet-backed Ethiopian military offensive.

In the months following, the bourgeois press took the opportunity to pronounce a post mortem on the 18-year Eritrean struggle for independence from Ethiopia, calling the conflict all but over.

The *Christian Science Monitor* ran a story that announced that "the remnants of the Eritrean forces are holed up near Karora" (a small town on the Sudan border in northern Eritrea) while the Ethiopian army had reoccupied the rest of the Pennsylvania-size Red Sea territory.

This was a gross distortion of the true situation. It grew out of a fundamental lack of understanding of the strategy and tactics of protracted people's war. It ignored the political foundation of military struggle.

But it was not only the bourgeois press who misunderstood the overall situation in Eritrea last year. As *Guardian* readers will recall, a small group of U.S. ultra-"leftists," led by the Central Organization of U.S. Marxist-Leninists (COUSML), joined the U.S.-based Eritreans for Liberation in North America (EFLNA) in denouncing the EPLF, adding one more layer of confusion to an already complex situation. [COUSML is a pro-Albania sect with little practice or influence. EFLNA temporarily seized control of the U.S. organization in support of the Eritrean struggle and turned it against the EPLF. The Association of Eritrean Students in North America reformed from EFLNA and is now the mass student organization in the U.S. representing the EPLF, the vanguard of the Eritrean struggle.]

The ultra-"leftists" charged EPLF with defeatism, with capitulations to Ethiopia and to the Soviet Union. They railed at supporters of EPLF, disrupted forums, distributed slanderous propaganda (using money collected earlier in the name of EPLF) and broke all ties with all movements actually fighting in Eritrea.

Needless to say, many U.S. progressives were thrown into a quandary by these actions and Eritrea support work here suffered a setback more severe than the-EPLF's military reversals on the battlefield.

That support work is only now recovering, but it is possible – and necessary – at this point to look back at these events and analyze what happened, why it happened and how it was corrected.

### **Main Danger**

COUSML and EFLNA took as their starting point for evaluating the Eritrea situation their characterization of the Soviet Union as "social-imperialist." They held that the USSR is the main danger

to the workers and oppressed peoples of the world. They concluded that the EPLF's refusal to take a similar stand forfeited their political and military leadership of the struggle.

From this premise, it was a short step to misinterpret EPLF's physical retreats from the towns as a loss of will to fight. Diplomatic contacts with the ruling Ethiopian Derg would be seen as a sell-out under this misguided view.

And they also mistakenly took the complaints of a small number of EPLF deserters – mainly urban intellectuals including three or four who had recently been in the U.S. – as a sign of internal EPLF collapse and a loss of popular support.

We can now see from subsequent events just how wrong this analysis was. In six short months – from January to July – the EPLF broke the Ethiopian offensive and is today resuming widespread offensive military operations. As I saw during a recent 2-month trip to Eritrea, the EPLF is united politically and as strong militarily as it has ever been.

### **Important Lessons**

But it is not enough to pat ourselves on the back and say we were right, EFLNA and COUSML were wrong. There are important lessons here, not only with respect to Eritrea but for all of us in the U.S. concerned with rebuilding an organized, popular revolutionary movement.

In my opinion "leftism" is the main danger to party-building at this moment. The EFLNA debacle is important therefore because it provides one more component of our practical experience with ultra-"leftism" from which eventually we will draw the theoretical conclusions necessary to defeat it (for the moment) and move on with our' critical long term struggle with right opportunism.

A central feature of EFLNA (and its U.S. supporters) was its petit-bourgeois class base. It was composed principally of urban intellectuals and students who lacked any direct experience of the struggle in their homeland and who had no ongoing direct links with it.

A handful had made brief visits to the field but they were otherwise essentially spectators to both the war and the social revolution led by EPLF.

Though they were able to advance rapidly at a theoretical level due to their access to study materials and to the sheer amount of time on their hands, they lacked the critical tests of practice necessary to carry their study through to correct conclusions. Furthermore they were ill-equipped to correctly apply this theory to the concrete new conditions of the struggle at a critical historical moment.

EFLNA displayed a typically petit bourgeois impatience to advance politically and organizationally faster than objective conditions in the field permitted. They were on the verge of announcing the formation of an M-L party to take over leadership of the liberation struggle when the full extent of their errors became clear and they backed off.

Just as typically, they confuse tactics with strategy. Had their armchair military analysis been followed and the EPLF not retreated, the armed struggle would have suffered suicidal losses and been set back for years.

### **When to Retreat**

A revolutionary knows as well when to retreat as when to advance. You do not battle with your enemy for its own sake. You fight to win, falling back when you are weaker than your foe, building your strength and returning to defeat him later.

In-all areas EFLNA tended to raise tactical issues to the level of strategic principles, fixing on absolute positions such as never negotiating with the enemy. In short, they vastly oversimplified an extremely complex political, military and diplomatic situation. They took individual elements and events entirely out of context and failed to comprehend the total picture.

..In the end, though, as all such ultra-"leftism" is bound to do, EFLNA fell into rampant idealism. They misread the reality of the war, misjudged the popular will and found themselves almost completely isolated from their own people, not only inside Eritrea but even here in the U.S.

The vast majority of Eritreans here showed great personal courage, humility and political wisdom in breaking ranks with this organization. In August they formally established the Association of Eritrean Students in North America (AESNA) and affiliated with the EPLF as a mass organization of the front.

One of the main EFLNA leaders committed suicide after co-authoring a lengthy self-criticism, but the remnants of the "leftist" splinter group this summer rejected the full critique and ousted the old leaders. They have moved to a new position, however, of supporting all the armed Eritrean movements equally (the China line). But they continue to hold almost \$400:000 of the EPLF s money.

In the long run EFLNA's actions last year will be relegated to a footnote in the history of the Eritrean revolution. Ultra-"leftism" in its ideological, political and organizational forms is less a serious danger than a minor irritation to the EPLF, as one would expect in a revolution at such a stage of mass participation.

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