

PARTY BUILDING ?

- hamerquist -

Though the entirety of the STATEMENT ON PARTY BUILDING is both distressing and depressing, its conclusion has some merit.

"The potential for a major breakthrough in Party building exists. Let us take the necessary steps - ideological, political and organizational - to realize it."

But what are these "necessary steps - ideological, political and organizational..."? One could search the document forever without finding a plausible answer. Instead of discussing the real problems and possibilities facing the Party, the Statement rests on a cliché-choked superficial political analysis combined with exhortations to the Party rank and file to "try harder" to build the organization. In fact, the document is an outstanding example of the thinking and approach, the "imbecilic self-sufficiency", which must be eliminated before we will build the Party. The first "necessary step" is to throw out this document and begin a new kind of discussion on Party building.

Such a discussion must necessarily begin with two questions, both of which are evaded by the Statement: Is the Party growing? If so, why; if not, why not? An honest treatment of the facts would indicate that the Party has not been growing - that it has been barely holding its own. We would see, for example, that previous recruiting campaigns, including the one adopted at the 1966 Convention which we are still supposed to be working on, but which the Statement fails to even mention, have gotten nowhere.

This cannot be blamed on unfavorable objective conditions. We have not been "a peridd when the left was shrinking. The past few years of political ferment have created a substantial growth in the number of people who are radical in both life style and world view. This new left increasingly accepts a Marxist ideological framework, and a growing proportion of it accepts the need for a coherent and cohesive revolutionary organization - a vanguard party. These changes have not just affected the way people think. Already there are a variety of organizational experiments aimed towards a vanguard party. These range from discussion groups to non-affiliated party-modeled collectives with some degree of internal discipline.

If we have a situation where hundreds of the most committed and active people on the left have convinced themselves of the need for a vanguard Party, why hasn't this led to a corresponding growth of the Party? The difficulty lies in the small step between an understanding of the need for a vanguard party and the growth of the CPUSA. People must be convinced that this Party is - or that it can become - a vanguard Party. Right now, opinion on the left is that we are not and cannot - or will not - become such an organization.

Such an opinion might make the Party very indignant, but a much more productive response would be to evaluate and explain our role over the past few years in a way that would dispell these criticisms. We must demonstrate what the Statement merely asserts:

"There is no path to Marxist-Leninist positions and to the best possible party other than the persistent attempt to build and improve the party we now have."

If this were self-evident, we would have no trouble meeting our recruiting quotas.

The obstacles to our growth in quantity and quality are not primarily the misinformation and ignorance of those whom we would like to recruit. That could be handled with better public relations. The real obstacle is our failure to meet people's expectations of what a revolutionary vanguard party - the conscious element of a potential ruling class - should do. To overcome these obstacles we must either justify or criticize our record.

In this context I would like to make some general criticisms of the Party. Though the criticisms are my own, I know that they are widely shared in non-Party sections of the left and are among the reasons that keep people from us.

History poses one simple question to all self-asserted vanguard parties. Did they lead mass struggle in a revolutionary direction? Any Party that is chronically found in the rear, not the van, of mass struggles will be regarded with a good deal of scepticism, if it claims to be a vanguard. This is the heart of our problems. During the last few years our role has been to mobilize behind the leadership of others. The Party has seldom even gone so far as to define a position sufficiently sharp that it might provide a base from which to struggle for the ideological and programatic leadership of a specific struggle. Then, in some crucial areas where we did begin to define our own position, we failed to carry it out and capitulated to difficulties. In retrospect it seems undeniable that the opportunity existed for the Party to play a vanguard role in a number of movements and struggles. We did not rise to the opportunity.

Consider the movement for black liberation: The Party saw that the exploitation and oppression of black people entailed that the movement for equality stress mass economic issues. We recognized that the struggle of an oppressed people must be for real power, not for abstract rights. We recognized that real equality must be gained by black people as a people, not as a collection of disadvantaged individuals. We recognized that capitalism put limits on the black liberation struggle well on this side of either full equality or the right to power over their own institutions. These positions are all widely held in the black movement now, but it was the force of circumstances, not our leadership, that caused it.

In practice, the Party abandoned any approach to black people as a national question. We became assimilationists and integrationists and were unpardonably slow to recognize the progressive content and the mass appeal of black nationalism. The Party equivocated for months in its attitude towards black power and failed to take a clear position on self defense. Finally, and perhaps most important, the Party did not take advantage of countless opportunities to lead the struggle on those aspects which involved the basic class questions - the grievances which stem from black people being the most exploited section of the working class. We did not develop real initiatives in struggles on economic questions and we did not exert real effort in the struggle against racism, particularly racism in the organized labor movement.

This is the record - or the absence of a record - which stands in the way of recruiting militant black people into the party. White radicals, too, would be much more likely to accept our vanguard status, if they saw us exercising leadership in the black sections of the movement.

For another example, consider the Party's work on independent political action in the past two years. It is no secret that many on the left have interpreted our policy as one of strengthening the liberal wing of the Democratic Party to force an eventual realignment to the left and a polarization within the two party system. Thus the increasing emphasis that the Party began to put on developing the political and organizational basis for a breakaway from the two party system following the election of Goldwater was both welcomed and looked at with some scepticism. The sceptics say it as a rhetorical facade covering another attempt to realign the Democratic Party when it was under internal stress on the issues of war and racism. Their position was buttressed when it became apparent that the Party was not implementing its own program. When they happened, the independent political organizations were initiated by others, and in many areas where we had strength they did not happen at all. Later, the tendency of the Party to drift into the MacCarthy orbit was taken as conclusive evidence that we had not seriously intended to build the framework for a mass breakaway from the two party system, but had only aimed at "dumping Johnson". This contributed to the demoralization of most of the left which is quickly undermining what nuclei exist for independent political action. Our record in this area is not inspiring to those looking for a vanguard organization.

Of course, I don't think that a few paragraphs is an adequate review of our work in these two crucial areas. I do think that such a review in these and most other areas of work would generally sustain a critical overall estimate. More specifically, I think it would support many of the criticisms of the Party that are common currency in the left.

There is another aspect to the vanguard role. It consists in leading people to see the limits of capitalism and the possibility of an alternative to it in an intellectual process. Many people have been moving to the left in large part because of their contact with radical and Marxist ideas, theories, and analyses. But most have done this in spite of or, at best, independently of the way the Party has presented Marxism. We have not been the source of the creative development of analysis and strategy which could have made us the center of the left. Non-communist radicals and Marxists have been responsible for the growth of a left intelligentsia in this country. Marcuse, Fanon, Mills, Gorz, Debray and Sweezy may not have been "correct", but they inspired others to struggle for clarity while we have not.

For me, the conclusion is inescapable that we have not played a vanguard role in either the practical or the ideological struggles of the time. And the opportunity existed and still exists. In fact, I could point to a number of sections in the Draft Program and in the discussion on it, which show that the Party does not even have an idea of what the vanguard role relevant to this period might be. The question that emerges is whether we can become the vanguard? As indicated earlier, many of those who should be joining the Party, do not because they answer this question in the negative. It's possible to see some of the sources of such attitudes in the Statement on Party Building.

The Statement never mentions that there is a left in the country. It talks of recruiting "workers...Negro people, Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans...youth..." But which youth, what workers? The impression is created that we intend to find our recruits among people who have not yet become radicals. Then the Party could grow without participating in the ideological struggle in the left - without fighting for hegemony over the left. But then, also, people with honest criticisms of the Party must conclude that they will find no way inside the Party of resolving their criticisms, no way conceivable in which they could change the Party. If this is the impression that we give, how can we expect people with their own minds to join the Party. And, of course, the fallacy of thinking that we can grow without being the center of the left is obvious.

The tendency to regard our position as "correct" and our mode of operation as "scientific" a priori has the same consequence. Given our record, such a position is evidence of either incredible stupidity or shameful isolation from actual struggle - or both. People won't join the Party if they feel its public statements chronically reflect stupidity or isolation, because they will despair of changing positions with either facts or logic. Most people are just not going to join until they feel that their membership in the Party will help them to think more creatively, not be an obstacle to this.

But most important, I think, to convincing people that the Party is capable of being a vanguard party is to give some indication that we are aware of our own weaknesses. If, for example, we could one time look at a policy and have something to say beyond that the "policy was correct; the membership didn't understand it fully; the leadership didn't clarify it adequately", that would be a good beginning.

These kinds of issues must be confronted before we can project a recruiting program that is relevant to anything, and, if we confront them, people will begin to join the Party in the way that they should.