

Notes for the February 1978 Conference
By Worker Unity Organization

The Committee of 5 has followed up on the decision of the August conference to coordinate discussion within our tendency on the immediate steps necessary for consolidation by suggesting that participating groups write up their answers to five specific questions. We welcome the Committee's initiative and their offer to circulate the different groups' responses. We offer our suggestions in the spirit of unity-struggle-unity with the intention of making a contribution to the development of principled ideological struggle. In our response we will speak first to the objective state of the Marxist-Leninist movement in this country, then respond to the five questions, and conclude with a brief sum-up of some lessons to be learnt from the Bolshevik party-building experience, and in particular the Iskra period. We hope, in so doing, to contribute to the February conference and to the strengthening of the unity within our tendency.

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The Marxist-Leninist Movement in the U.S.

The Marxist-Leninist movement in the U.S. is marked by the continuing predominance of a left opportunist trend. The theory and practice of this trend is characterized by "left" forms of sectarianism, dogmatism, economism and adventurism. Recently there has emerged an embryonic anti-revisionist anti-"left" opportunist tendency. However this tendency has not yet emerged as a clearly defined "trend."

Confirms Paul's

We call a trend only a definite sum of political ideas which have become well defined in regard to all the most important questions of both the revolution and the counter revolution; ideas which moreover have proved their right to existence as a trend by being disseminated among broad strata of the working class...

(LCW, Vol. 17, pp. 271-72)

The objective state of our tendency is hardly marked by well defined political ideas, let alone ones that have been widely disseminated within the working class. Our tendency is characterized by uneven development and amateurish approaches to both theory and practice. We have made at best minimal progress in the task of fusing Marxism-Leninism with the working class movement, a task which is the essence of the overall party-building process. The "Draft Resolution," while incorrectly placing the mantle of the M-L trend on our "embryonic tendency," accurately sums up our low level of development:

It must be recognized, however, that the M-L trend exists in embryonic form. As compared to both the revisionists and the dogmatists who have consolidated views, large organizations, national presses, and relatively unified leaderships, the M-L trend exists mainly in the form of small, local organizations. It lacks a coherent viewpoint and contains a rather broad range of diverse and contradictory opinions. It has few newspapers; most of its publishing is confined to pamphlets and leaflets. And its leadership is disunited...

(page 3)

good quote

in a similar vein, El Comité points out the extreme primitiveness of our work, our failure as a tendency to resolve the contradiction between theory and practice, and the continuing prevalence of groupist and sectarian practice. (See "Party-Building and its Relation to the Masses.")

The August conference was a graphic demonstration of the embryonic nature of our development as a tendency. The groups in attendance were, for the most part, no more than a few years old; they had relatively little practice in fusing M-L with the working class movement, and they were unevenly developed theoretically. This is no reason to be pessimistic about the potential for our tendency, but ~~in order~~ to transform this into actual progress, we must recognize the objective state of the tendency.

Yet the August conference, and the subsequent initiative of the Committee of 5, represent small but significant steps forward. It was a step forward for the conference to revise Principle 15 on the main danger in the M-L movement, thereby recognizing that the broader category of "left" opportunism more accurately describes our unity on the main danger than did the term "dogmatism." But this step was only a beginning. Now we need to struggle over our differences on the specific aspect of "left" opportunism which characterizes the main danger, in order to reach unity on this and on the significance of the question for party-building strategy.

At this time, our tendency has no single coherent party-building strategy. The initial debate on the "Draft Resolution" revealed significant differences on this question even within the Committee of 5. Thus we welcome the present exchange of views as an indication of the tendency's willingness to move beyond the current situation.

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Response to the Committee of 5's Questions

1. What should be the relationship of national to local work in this period?

The groups in our tendency are organized on a local basis. Scattered as we are, we tend to direct our blows on a local level, against the particular corporations, the particular state organs we face in our local work. But the capitalist class is organized on a national and international basis. Our weakness is not in doing local work but in failed to develop a national approach in our local work. Thus our local work lacks national significance, and we tend to fall into localist errors. This weakens our ability to integrate M-L with the working class movement as a whole.

Our tendency's approach, or more accurately lack of a common approach to the recent UAW convention illustrates this. Many of our organizations have participated in local union campaigns and in organizing shop floor movements around class struggle programs. Yet, despite our unity around at least the broad outlines of an approach to trade union work, we were unable to develop a joint approach to the convention. We had no common stance towards the particular questions at issue in the convention, and so we were unable to turn our theory into a weapon in the hands of the working class in that particular arena of struggle. We were unable to test out the strengths and weaknesses of our approach to trade union work.

How can we call ourselves a trend when we are unable to act together on the basis of a common approach? How can we call ourselves a trend when we are unable to establish a presence on such occasions? There were trends at the convention - the CPUSA represented the revisionist trend, while the "left" opportunist trend was represented by the RCP and the CP (M-L). The underlying ideological stance of both trends is being clarified before the class in just such arenas as the UAW - the reformism of the CPUSA and the "left" version of M-L (drawing on anarcho-syndicalism). We have yet to develop and put into practice an anti-revisionist, anti-"left" opportunist approach to trade union work.

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KEY SENTENCE

2 & 3. Can there be a leading ideological center which is not a party?
Under what conditions would it be correct to establish such a center?

We distinguish here:

- The essentially theoretical question: Can there be a leading ideological center which is not a party?
- Under what conditions is it correct to establish a leading ideological center?
- How does the objective state of our tendency relate to the task of meeting these conditions?
- Is emphasis on centralizing the ideological struggle a necessary pre-condition for the emergence of a real leading ideological center?

There can be a leading ideological center short of the organizational consolidation of a communist party. The process of pulling together the advanced elements of the class, which is necessary for the formation of a genuine communist party, is a protracted one. Ideological unity must be achieved, key questions of political line clarified and embodied in a Programme, the broad outlines of strategy and tactics for revolution must be worked out, and there must be clear progress in the task of fusing M-L with the working class movement. All these elements are necessary preconditions for the consolidation of a vanguard party. The process of meeting these preconditions involves concrete ideological, political, and organizational steps. The guiding principle is that the organizational steps must march hand in hand with the actual level of ideological and political unity. We understand the concept of a "leading ideological center" to be a conjuncture of clearly defined ideological unity consolidated in a leading organizational form short of a fully consolidated communist party.

On the level of party-building theory, we have no problems with such a conception. In fact, given the pervasive existence of ultra-leftism in the history of our movement, and the resultant extreme fragmentation, organizational forms short of a party are almost certainly going to be necessary.

The real questions now facing our tendency are rather: What are the necessary conditions for the emergence of a leading center? How do we move now towards meeting those conditions? As we pointed out earlier, a "leading" center is not proclaimed; it is developed in concrete practice on all planes of the class struggle. It emerges as the product of protracted ideological and political struggle. It is the organizational consolidation of a specific clearly defined trend, which has defined itself not merely to itself, but also to the rest of the party-building movement and to important sectors of the class.

In carrying out this protracted process of building a "leading center" we must guard against errors from both the right and the "left." We must consolidate organizationally the ideological and political unity we achieve, and struggle against those who would hold back this progress. But we must also avoid the "left" error of trying to achieve today what is only possible in the future, of overestimating the extent of political and ideological unity and so attempting to set up an organizational structure which is out of line with the unity we have actually achieved.

An immediate task for all of us within the tendency is to scientifically determine whether the main danger to the further consolidation of our party building efforts is coming from the right or the "left." It is our estimate, after a careful study of all the documents and positions that have been put forward, that the main danger presently comes from the "left." The key to understanding the precise nature of this error is an examination of the objective state of our tendency in relation to the conditions necessary for the organizational consolidation of a "leading ideological center." Given the low level of ideological and political unity that

we say from the right

has been achieved so far within our tendency, it would be a classic "left" error to proclaim ourselves, or any subset of our tendency as a "leading ideological center." We have barely begun the necessary process of struggle to clarify the key questions of party building strategy, let alone other questions of political line. We have not even discussed where unity is necessary, what the "most important questions of the revolution and counter revolution" are.

At present our unity is limited to that embodied in the 18 principles. It would be a profound misreading of party-building theory to assert that the unity embodied in these principles is sufficient for the constitution of a "leading ideological center." Moreover, it should be clear from the recent conference that our unity even around these 18 principles is limited.

For example, at the August conference, Principle 15 was amended in what we think is a correct direction. Yet this positive step was not connected with any discussion of the significance of the change for strategy and tactics. The general attitude seemed to be that it didn't make much difference whether we characterize the main danger as dogmatism or "left" opportunism. But it is an important question. As PWOC put it:

A correct resolution to this discussion is essential to the future of the M-L movement. There is a root error and if that root is not singled out, the diseased plant will continuously send forth new shoots.

("Dogmatism - The Root of Opportunism in our Movement," The Organizer, July 1977)

Our tendency has only just begun the process of studying the roots of "left" opportunism in the movement as a whole and in our own midst. In this light, a recent development within the tendency especially concerns us and points to the need to place a clear priority on deepening our collective understanding of the roots and specific forms of "left" opportunism. The PWOC recently summed up its organization-wide convention ("PWOC Convention Charts Future Course," The Organizer, October 1977). According to the article, "rightism" was identified as the main error in PWOC's practice. There is not a single mention of any danger of "leftism" within the practice of PWOC, nor is there any analysis of the effects of errors (from the right or "left") on the implementation of party-building strategy. Our tendency cannot afford to ignore the danger of "leftism" in its own ranks, or to look at our own errors in abstraction from our central task of party-building.

A long series of amendments to the 18 principles were offered at the August conference. But in general these amendments, apart from a few centering on principles 15 and 18, were not circulated in advance. It is hard therefore to see how the organizations present could have consolidated positions on the amendments. Yet virtually every one of them was accepted with little discussion and no voting.

On principle 18 it did appear that most organizations had studied the proposed changes and had organizational stances on whether any changes should be made. But it also appeared that many organizations were unclear on the question of international line in general. When the Guardian offered an extremely significant amendment to "change the language" to make the focus on the "primary contradiction in the world today between U.S. imperialism and its allies on the one hand and national liberation struggles on the other," most groups were unprepared to even take up the underlying questions involved.

Why are we pointing out these examples of relative unclarity on the part of the tendency? We are not doing so in order to argue for the tendency to jump right in and provide paper answers immediately or in the near future. Rather, we are trying

*insufficient
focuses out
Communism
non class stance
by Guardian*

to call attention to the fact that our tendency does not have the necessary ^{ideological} ~~real~~ unity and coherence to call itself a trend. Therefore we have no business at this stage in our development calling ourselves a "leading ideological center." The principles of unity should, in our view, continue to be seen as draft principles, principles which can play a role in the process of consolidating our unity, but which in and of themselves do not identify a coherent trend, nor, as yet, a clear summary of our unity.

An objective appraisal of the state of our tendency leads us to the conclusion that we should concentrate our energy on centralizing the ideological struggle rather than attempting to consolidate organizationally an ideological center which "proclaims" its leading role. The process of centralizing the ideological struggle would require concrete organizational steps such as the creation of a theoretical journal and a more extensive use of the conference concept. These organizational steps should be made in step with the actual level of our unity and coherence. Because of the embryonic stage of development, such a center should be for the purpose of clarifying key questions, initially and most importantly, the question of party-building strategy. By centralizing the debate around party building strategy we can provide a real context for exploring the process by which we can weld a "leading" ideological center.

We think that the basis on which this center should be organized should be no higher than the unity embodied in the 18 principles and the conception should be to represent within the center all significant forces within our tendency. We detect an important contradiction in the position taken in the "Draft Resolution for a Leading Ideological Center." On the one hand, the resolution argues correctly that:

The organizing committee (for the ideological center - ed.), based on those principles of unity, would have to be assembled so that it was representative as possible of the different perspectives in the trend. Otherwise, it could not establish itself with a sufficient national following so as to give leadership to the development of a really recognized center.

But this generally correct position is undercut by a subsequent statement in the same resolution:

Obviously, for the center to play a leading role, it must have a higher basis of unity than the lowest common denominator of the trend as a whole. While this would lead to the initial exclusion of certain groups, which while they are groping in an anti-dogmatist direction have not sufficiently consolidated around M-L it is absolutely necessary in the center if it is to be capable of providing any meaningful leadership.

There has been no further statements on this. We have not been told what this "higher level of unity" should consist of. But the proposal itself indicates an incorrect understanding of leadership in this period. Correct leadership is not defined by the fact that those leading have a higher level of unity than the trend in general, but rather by whether or not the political basis of unity is sufficient to carry out the necessary tasks of this period. Since we see the tasks to be a further clarification of the unity of the tendency as a whole particularly around party building and the nature of the main danger within our movement, we do not agree that this ill-defined "higher level of unity" is necessary or obvious. Quite the contrary, it would be a "left" error to put forward the need for higher unity than is needed to accomplish the tasks before us. The present 18 point provide a sufficient basis for determining the composition of the center.

4. How much emphasis should be put on efforts towards centralization as opposed to coordination at the national level in this period?

As can be seen from our treatment of the previous questions, Worker Unity Organization emphasizes the necessity of centralizing the ideological struggle as the key element in our immediate tasks. By centralization we mean defining clearly the key questions that face the tendency as a whole and developing concrete mechanisms for answering these questions. At this point we do not see this process of centralization as representing the organizational consolidation of a clearly defined "trend." Precisely because we do not have ideological and political coherency, and because our ideas have not been put to the test of class struggle, the central task of any "center" would be to focus the ideological struggle necessary for a definite "trend" to emerge.

In order to accomplish this central task, any center we develop must address itself immediately to deepening and broadening the ideological and political struggle within the tendency. The first step in this process of deepening and broadening is to define clearly the key questions we need to speak to. The proposal put forward in the "Draft Resolution for a Leading Ideological Center" presents us with a laundry list of tasks, all of which are important over the long run for the thorough consolidation of an anti-"left" opportunist trend. But there is little guidance on what the "key link" is at present, the most important immediate task whose accomplishment would clarify and aid in the accomplishment of all other tasks. To assert the importance of "coordinating the struggle against dogmatism and revisionism" and the "elaboration of N-L in U.S. conditions does not constitute a guide for the future work of the tendency in its particulars.

We argue that the single most important task today is the clarification of our tendency's party building strategy, and in particular the nature and significance of the main danger within the U.S. party-building forces. The Draft Resolution assumes that our strategy is already clear. Yet the initial responses to this resolution point to the disagreements on strategy.

The debate between PWOC, PBO, and the Guardian (mostly carried on in the pages of the Guardian) demonstrates the fact that there are still important differences within the tendency on such questions as the relation between "fusion" and party-building, theory and practice in the context of party building, etc. In addition, documents circulating within the tendency by Boston Party Building Organization, Communist Unity Organization, Proletarian Unity League, and ourselves among others also raise substantive questions on strategy that have not yet been taken up in thorough going and tendency wide discussions.

Although we do not agree with all the analysis or some of the conclusions put forward by El Comite in "Party Building and its Relationship to the Masses," we think they have been exemplary in putting fundamental questions of party building strategy before the tendency. The tendency as a whole must address itself to these questions, and the February conference will provide us with an opportunity to do so.

We must be careful not to assume that our easy agreement at the August conference to the amendment to principle 15 means that we now have deeper unity on the main danger in the party building forces. The debates at that conference, and the process by which only one of the principles, number 18, (U.S. is the main danger) has been used to exclude any group shows that for many of the groups at the conference the main danger is neither dogmatism nor "left" opportunism but rather "class collaboration around international line" (which principle 18 supposedly provides a test for).

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There are also differences within our tendency on the specific role that "left" errors have played in the party building strategy of RCP and CP (ML). How much unity does our tendency have with PUL's analysis of this, as opposed to the Guardian's (e.g. their article, "Political Line is Key")?

The unity of our tendency around party building requires that we take up the differences amongst us, that we broaden the struggle in order to include all significant forces within our tendency. We register again our objection to the exclusion of the Proletarian Unity League from thorough participation in this process of struggle. It is ironic and indicative of the prevalence of a "groupist" spirit in our own midst that we have managed to exclude the group that, no matter what political differences we may have with them, has done by far the most thoroughgoing analysis of the ideological and political roots of "left" opportunism. Rather than excluding them, we should be collectively studying Two, Three, Many Parties in order to struggle over the differences we may have with them in the spirit of unity-struggle-unity.

5. What is the next step that our trend must take? (Detail any structural changes in local organizations that are called for, the main tasks to be addressed, etc.)

The deepening of our ideological and political unity around party building strategy is key to developing an anti-"left" M-L tendency. This calls for some concrete organizational steps, despite the relatively low level of unity we have. Most important is the establishment of a theoretical journal. This journal would provide the organized context for developing the struggle for a coherent party building plan. The editorial board for this journal should represent all significant forces in our tendency. It should not see itself as the "leading" center, but rather as being responsible for centralizing the ideological debate and discussion necessary to provide a firm underpinning for any such "leading center" that may develop in the future.

In addition, we are capable of developing a more consistent and coherent "conference approach." Specific conferences can serve to develop a common approach to our practice. Our work in trade unions, community struggles, national liberation support etc. can serve to test out in practice the concrete meaning of our unity as an anti-revisionist, anti-"left" opportunist tendency. The conferences that we have had so far, although very helpful, have suffered from a failure to focus directly on a collective analysis of how our practice is contributing to the consolidation of the struggle for M-L and against errors of both the "left" and right. Although these conferences should be seen as a lesser priority than solidifying our ideological unity through the mechanism of the journal, they do provide an important opportunity to sum up our unity.

As far as we can see, no internal organizational changes are called for within local organizations at this time. We do not see the subordination of our present organizational forms to a national pre-party formation as on the immediate horizon. The necessary ideological and political unity necessary for such a transformation does not yet exist. We also recognize that none of the proposals being put forward is calling for such a transformation. We do see the need for all groups in the tendency to focus on the national context within which we carry out our work. It is also necessary for groups to recognize that the establishment of a theoretical journal and other organizational moves can only be successful if we commit ourselves to provide the cadres and resources required.

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Lessons From The Iskra Period

Worker Unity Organization has recently completed a process of extensive internal

study of party building theory. As part of this, we studied the experience of various parties which have successfully led revolutionary struggles. We were pleased to see the Committee of 5 provide a brief bibliographical guide on the Russian party building experience. We see this as a small step towards uniting the general world historic experience of the proletariat with the specific conditions facing us in the U.S. We offer the following brief sum-up of some of the key points we gleaned from a study of the Iskra period of the Bolshevik party in the hope of making a contribution to the tendency's collective understanding of the general theory of party building. We wish to communicate a special comradely thanks to Communist Unity Organization for contributing to the development of our clarity on this important period. We found the documents they have produced to be especially helpful.

There are real limits to the analogy between our current situation in the U.S. and the situation facing the Bolsheviks in the "Iskra period." We are at a much earlier, more "embryonic stage" in the development of a communist party than were the Russian Marxists at the turn of the century. Four main factors stand out as defining the differences between our situations:

- The theoretical foundations had been laid in Russia by 1900.
- The "first steps to the working class" had been taken in Russia before 1900.
- Social-democracy (Marxism-Leninism) had already "appeared on the scene as a social movement, as the upsurge of the masses of people, as a political party." (Lenin, WTTBD, LCW 5, p. 517)

In Russia at that point, the main danger was right opportunism, in the specific form of economism. In the U.S. the main danger is "left" opportunism. In particular, the isolation and fragmentation of our movement today is primarily caused and justified by "left" sectarianism, not by economism.

Despite the differences, which simply point to the need to avoid mechanical dogmatic analogies to the Iskra period, there are some general lessons for party building theory which can be applied to the U.S. situation.

1. The goal of the ideological struggle conducted by Lenin and those comrades closest to him was unity,

Unification based on a strict singleness of principle which must be consciously and firmly arrived at by all or the vast majority of committees, organizations, and groups of intellectuals and workers, who act in varying circumstances and under varying conditions, and have sometimes arrived at their social democratic convictions along the most diverse paths.

("Announcement of the Formation of the Organizing Committee, LCW 6, 307)

This unity could not be decreed, it had to be worked for, developed through protracted ideological and political struggle. The purpose of the struggle was to isolate the diehard defenders of bourgeois ideology, but just as important was to unite all who could be united to defeat this common enemy, the diehards. The approach taken, the methods of struggle employed therefore, was not to struggle over every conceivable "partial" question in order to reach the highest level of unity abstractly possible. Rather the struggles were clearly focused around just those "fundamental question" the answers to which determined whether or not the struggle of the proletariat was to move forward.

2. Lenin and the core of Iskraists were clear on what they had to fight against in order to re-unify and re-consolidate the Russian Marxist party. The key unifying point that led to the Iskra formation was precisely their unity on the main danger within the revolutionary forces. Iskra consolidated on the basis of a common critique of economism and its underlying reformism. The struggle was carried out over the "fundamental questions of principle and tactics raised by the ...economists" (LCW 4, 354) in order

to establish "a party that remains consolidated and united despite partial differences of opinion among its members on partial questions." (ICW 4, 231) Differences on the national question, for example, which were later to become fundamental differences, were, in this period partial questions. These partial questions were partial precisely because the fundamental question was to unite in common struggle against economism. The unity necessary was that required to carry out the central task of consolidating the Marxist forces in a revolutionary, M-L party.

This unity was not always forged in the struggle against right opportunism. The struggle against the "left" Narodniks and their successors, the Socialist revolutionaries, required a similar consideration of what were fundamental, and what were partial questions.

3. In order to defeat the main danger in the Iskra period, economism, the anti-economist forces undertook the task of "open and all embracing discussion of the fundamental questions of principle and tactics raised by the ...economists." (ICW 4, 354). They did not just organize the anti-economists, they organized them in the struggle against economism.

How did they do this? Lenin wrote:

In the first place it is necessary to develop a common Party literature - common, not only in the sense that it must serve the whole of the Russian movement rather than the separate districts, that it must discuss the questions of the movement as a whole and assist the class-conscious proletarians in the struggle instead of dealing merely with local questions, but common also in the sense that it must unite all the available literary forces, that it must express all shades of opinion and views prevailing among Russian Social-Democrats.,," (ICW, 4, 323)

This was no mere turn of speech on Lenin's part. Lenin even proposed that Struve, the "legal" Marxist and revisionist, be a co-editor of Iskra because he was an important literary figure in the RSDLP. It was only as a result of Plekhanov's ultimatum that Lenin dropped this proposal. What has our approach been to the establishment of common literature and the inclusion of "important literary figures" such as PUL? We have a lot to learn from the Iskra period, but let us learn the right lessons

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Conclusion

We look forward to the February conference to clarify the differences within our tendency and to move forward the struggle for the development of a common strategy for party building. We would be happy to hear any comments on this paper in the period before the conference and urge groups to build ties within our tendency on the basis of correspondence and, where possible, joint work. The building of an anti-revisionist, anti-"left" tendency has begun, but we have a long hard struggle ahead of us.