

Conference Statement of the Ann Arbor Collective (M-L)

On January 22, 1977 the Ann Arbor Collective (M-L) attended a conference in Detroit on "the Fight against Racial and National Oppression." Participating were the Detroit Marxist-Leninist Organization, the Philadelphia Workers Organizing Committee, El Comite/MNIP, the Potomac Socialist Organization, the Socialist Union of Baltimore, the Workers Unity Organization of St. Louis, the Buffalo Workers Movement and the Wildcat organization from Chicago.

Before we express our reactions to the conference we feel it important to establish a theoretical basis in which the discussion must be conducted. Lenin defined the economic struggle as:

the collective struggles of the workers against the employers for better terms in the sale of their labor power, for better conditions of life and labor. (What is to Be Done?)

At the same time Lenin was clear on the relationship between the activity of communists and the economic struggle. He stated:

however much we may try to give the economic struggle itself a "political character" we shall never be able to develop the political consciousness of the workers by confining ourselves to the economic struggle, for the limits of this task are too narrow. (Ibid.)

In other words, the restriction of communist activity to the economic struggle is an error--economism. How does this relate to the struggle against racial and national oppression? We think that it is in harmony with Leninism to insist that the struggle against racial and national oppression is not inherently political or revolutionary. On the contrary, it can be conducted in an entirely economist manner--that is it can be restricted to a struggle in the narrow confines of the economic practice.

It is in this light that we view the Detroit Conference. Most of the conference time was spent precisely in discussions which can only be described as economist in character. The struggle against racism was all too often reduced to a struggle to improve the conditions of Black workers vis-a-vis the employers (capitalists). In and of itself this is not incorrect, but when racism is only fought in this way and not as a component part of a broader understanding of the function and responsibility of communists to the workingclass then economist errors are inevitable. At no point in the conference were these broader issues raised nor was the struggle against economism, both as a long term historical trend in our movement and as an immediate problem, discussed.

The only major issue which was not immediately economic which was raised at the conference was busing, and it came up not in its own right as a matter to be discussed, but only to the degree that representatives of other groups raised criticisms of El Comite's stated opposition to busing in Boston. But this was a relatively minor debate which was never dealt with thoroughly at the Conference.

The narrowness of the experience of the conference participants even in economic struggles was evident in the discussions where there was no broad unity achieved even in terms of tactical questions. DMLC and WUC strongly supported super-seniority for instance, while FWO and El Comite equally strongly opposed it. Much more time was expended on this issue than was given over to the discussion of differing approaches to the national question and its theoretical and strategic implications.

In terms of the theoretical and strategic approaches to the fight against national and racial oppression, FWO presented a demagogic speech which entirely avoided their published position on the Black nation. DMLC nonetheless presented its opposition to FWO's published position, but the brief discussion that followed was on an extremely low and confused theoretical level.

At the end of the conference, which had largely disintegrated at this time, as many of the delegates had departed early, a leader of DMLC summed it up by stating that it had "laid the basis for further struggle." Not further unity but merely further struggle.

In light of all this, how should we view the tendency which it represents? Clearly it is not a unified tendency held together by a common line. Rather it is a movement which is held together by its opposition to the many other currents which dominate the so-called new communist movement. What is the basis for its opposition? It is certainly not based on a recognition of the central importance of theory and the pervasive theoretical poverty which characterises the new communist movement.

Its opposition has two aspects: 1) while the overwhelming majority of the new communist movement has not lost its blind faith in China as the determining factor in their analysis, strategy and tactics, these "break-away" forces have paralleled the Guardian in its critical reassessment of China's theory and practice. And 2) these forces have singled out what they regard as sectarianism and dogmatism among the other forces and have attempted to oppose them.

Is this a sufficient basis for the constitution of a an-going trend and a future party? We think not. As we stated in AGAINST DOGMATISM AND REVISIONISM: TOWARD A GENUINE COMMUNIST PARTY a genuine communist movement must be built on solid foundations which break not just in part, but in whole with the so-called new communist movement, as the crystallization of past and present errors. As long as the various grouplets present at the Detroit Conference are either unwilling or unable to make this break they are almost inevitably dooming

their party building motion from the very beginning.

What should be the attitude of our organization and others of similar views to this tendency? Our impression, based on the conference, is that these forces are largely in the grip of the ideological counter-part of economism--workerism--and are strongly resistant to the concept that theoretical work is the key task of the communist movement in the present period. Given this orientation we feel that we can at present have little real influence on this tendency in pushing it in the right direction.

This should not preclude, however, our working with them in mutually beneficial situations, nor our making available to them the products of our theoretical and ideological practice. We should do so, without harboring any illusions about the effects of such work on them in this period.

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