

REPORT ON THE SOVIET UNION STUDY PROJECT FORUM  
HELD ON MAY 16, 1980 IN BOSTON

by the BOSTON POLITICAL COLLECTIVE (M-L)

Rectification leaders Bruce Occena and Tom Angotti began the forum by presenting the Study Project's political reasons for beginning their investigation with a critique of the Capitalist Restoration Thesis (CRT). The Project identifies the CRT as the "cornerstone of the left opportunist trend". The left opportunist trend remains united around the CRT though it is now divided on the Three Worlds Theory. In order for our trend to complete the break with the left opportunist trend, we need to extend our critique of the Three Worlds Theory to the CRT, which serves as the theoretical foundation of the Three Worlds Theory.

The Project also argues that the CRT is a main cause of the movement's theoretical poverty on the question of the Soviet Union. By asserting that the USSR is capitalist, the restorationists avoid an analysis of changes in socialist societies, and the political questions that this transition period raises such as the role of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the effects of revisionism. This non-Marxist thesis must be defeated in order to move on to these political questions.

Occena made it clear that Mao's political thought and practice during the Cultural Revolution are the next targets in the Project's struggle to defeat the ultra-left line.

"It is now possible that the CRT is a cruel joke on the Communist movement, given the shifts in the CPC." He went on to say that the CRT may have been adopted by Mao to aid in a factional, inner party struggle, designed to purge comrades like Liu Shao-qui. He implied that Lui's political line, which placed the development of the productive forces as the primary task of socialism, is viewed as correct by the Project.

The Stalinist nature of this position was revealed by the Project's identification of 1929 as the beginning of socialist development in the USSR, viewing the 1917-1929 period as that of consolidation of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The economism of the Project's critique was apparent not only in its political positions, but also in the method it has adopted to study the Soviet Union. They argue that only after the defeat of the CRT, can they begin to study the nature of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the effects of revisionism in power. In this way they eliminate examination of political relations of production from the determination of the nature of the Soviet economy. This methodological position assumes the primacy of forces of production over relations of production in determining the nature of a mode of production.

Guided by this methodology, the Project plans to spend the next year examining "what the USSR is" by looking at contending views of the Bolshevik revolution and the Stalin era. In conjunction, they also plan to study the CPC, focusing on a reevaluation of Mao's works and the political practice of the Cultural Revolution. It is important to realize that the political positions that they have already adopted assumes the answers to these questions.

II SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT'S CRITIQUE OF THE CRT

The Project identifies two main variants of the CRT which they label as the Political Economy thesis and the Superstructure thesis.

A. Political Economy Thesis

The Political Economy thesis argues that once revisionism gains power, the bourgeoisie slowly reemerges and capitalist conditions are reestablished; including unemployment, cycles of inflation and recession, declining living standards for the proletariat, and the reemergence of the market. Fascist terror explains the lack of working class resistance to this reestablishment of capitalism. The capitalist class is identified as the managers of enterprises; the Kosygin-Lieberman reforms of 1965 as the watershed of its return to power.

The Project's critique of this thesis is strictly empirical. They argue that there are no boom and bust cycles, no significant unemployment, no capitalist anarchy of production, improving rather than declining living conditions, and a decrease in the inequality of incomes. They use aggregate production and consumption figures to prove their position.

The Project defines socialist economic development as consisting of a planned economy, with the distribution of goods and services primarily benefiting the proletariat and peasantry, and enjoying constant economic growth. "In spite of the revisions it fetter", the Soviet economy still conforms to these features of socialist economic development.

B. Superstructure Thesis

The Project identifies Bettelheim as the most sophisticated exponent of the thesis which redefines capitalism as state capitalism of a new type. They hold that since his thesis is internally consistent, it can not be critiqued empirically but only theoretically by showing that its assumptions are not consistent with Marxism-Leninism.

They characterize his position as holding that the political line of the party determines the nature of the state. When the proletarian line is guiding the party there is a dictatorship of the proletariat; with a revisionist line the bourgeoisie is in power. They charge that his model is idealist because:

1. It assumes that political line automatically becomes a material force, and does not recognize the role of objective factors.
2. It recognizes no distinction between mind and matter. It denies the possibility of false consciousness by not recognizing that a party can have a bourgeois line without being a bourgeois party.
3. It fuels a conspiracy theory of Soviet history by claiming that bourgeois elements infiltrated the party and state apparatus, culminating with Stalin's consolidation of power in 1929.

They describe Bettelheim's method as "dialectical idealism" because it sees no qualitative distinction between capitalism and socialism. In this way "negation of the negation is thrown out the window" because Bettelheim doesn't see the socialist revolution negating capitalism and moving society to a higher level. They sum up Bettelheim's departure from Marxism-Leninism as his defense of Mao's view of the primacy of political and ideological class struggle in contrast to Marx's view that the dominant mode of production determines the political and ideological forces.

### III Project's Critique of Goldfield and Rothenberg' Transition Thesis

The majority of the Project views G and R's theory of a "transitional society" as incorrect because it applies the criteria of communism to socialism by identifying socialism as a period of classless society when the state begins to whither away. Thus it sees the main contradiction in socialism as eliminating the remaining inequalities. It sees no qualitative change resulting from the proletarian revolution and divorces the dictatorship of the proletariat from the era of socialism.

Angotti also argued that this thesis incorrectly sees socialism as a separate mode of production rather than as a transitional stage with underdeveloped laws of communism guiding its development.

The Project majority holds that there is a transitional period distinct from socialism, but that this period is relatively brief and consists of the consolidation of the dictatorship of the proletariat. They define 1917 to 1929 as this transition period in the USSR.

### IV Struggle over the Project's Critique

In neither the question-and-answer period nor the workshops was there any defense of the CRT. Rather, the debate focussed on the basis of the Project's rejection of the thesis; specifically, their critique of Bettelheim. The breakdown was clear and sharp: The Phil Brown study group and us defending Bettelheim, the Project and the fusionists attacking him. In fact, the main fusionist

criticism of the Project was that it wasn't economist enough: John Frampton charged that the rectification fetish about the "subjective factor" blinded the Project to the depth of Bettelheim's ultra-leftism.

The project and the fusionists united behind a "theory of productive forces" approach to the question of capitalist restoration, asserting that the main task of socialism is the development of the productive forces for the purpose of eliminating scarcity. They agreed that the only change in social relations necessary to socialism is the limination of private property and the "anarchy" of production for the market, and denied that there could be bourgeois social relations under socialism. Revisionism in the USSR simply retards progress (i.e. development of the productive forces) towards communism. We and the Phil Brown study group struggled against the economism of the Project and the fusionists, asserting that expropriation of the bourgeoisie in the juridical sense cannot be the whole story of socialism. We reintroduced the question of political relations which define the dictatorship of the proletariat: the political line of the party, the relations between the party and the masses, etc. We defended Bettelheim's focus on relations of production both at the point of production and in society as a whole.

The two workshops varied considerably as arenas for struggle. One, led by Tom Angotti, had a weak representation of fusionists (only Peter from the BOC) and two strong study group reps (Phil Brown and Henry Norr) as well as 3 BPC reps. The workshop began with a presentation by the Phil Brown study, setting the stage for a 3-hour discussion of Bettelheim. The other, led by Bruce Occena, included JF and Mark Warren (For the People), Dave from the study group, and 3 BPCers. Given less direction from Occena, Dave never made his prepared presentation, leaving more room for the fusionist crusade against the ultra-leftism of "rectification."

Our ability to intervene was directly related to the differences in the workshops. In the Angotti group, the stage was set for us to support and deepen the already strong position of the study group. In the other group, the lack of a formal presentation, combined with Occena's weak leadership, left the discussion unfocussed and open to JF's unselfconscious domination. Even worse, no open unity developed between Dave and the BPC, as existed from the beginning between us and the study group in the Angotti workshop. We were unable to compensate for this weaker performance from the study group either in setting a context through a presentation or in waging a more vigorous challenge to the Project and the fusionists.

Even with a strong intervention, however, it is unlikely that anyone was or could have been won over in the course of the workshops. Nearly all of the participants already had consolidated positions before the workshops and came in prepared to argue them. And in the course of the struggle, neither side

moved an inch. Occena mentioned (in the weaker of the two work-shops) that the discussions held in Boston had been of a much higher quality than those that had been held in other cities, in terms of people knowing something about the question and having strong positions. The significant exception was the delegation of the Boston Club. Few of them seemed to know much about the issue and even less about Bettelheim in particular. (Neither Tim Patterson nor Marion McDonald, who are usually vocal, said a word in the 3-hour discussion) Even the few who did have something to say put forth no strong or consolidated positions. While they seemed to lean toward the Project's critique, they could neither swallow it whole nor deepen it on their own.