

Discussion paper on relationship of theory to practice

by Committee for a Party Building Perspective

Our committee would like to clarify our views on the question of the relationship of theory to practice within the perspective of the development of BASOC. This paper is not intended as a proposed position for BASOC, but rather it is an attempt to speak to some differences raised by other comrades in the organization.

In the general relationship between theory and practice, practice is primary. What we mean by this is that consciousness, theory, and ideas are the reflection of changes and movement in class relations. Changes in class relations do not fundamentally come about as a result of the changes in ideas. To believe otherwise would be idealist, not materialist. Theory is the summation of our experience of the changing material conditions of society, including our own attempts to change social reality. Aspects of theory that are not adequately based upon the actual observation of changes in the material world are false theory--merely words.

Does that mean that Marxists should always put the main emphasis in every period on their participation in practice among the masses? No--because the struggle over the correct or incorrect summation of practice becomes the struggle over theory. Marxists do not participate in class struggles as unthinking accidental participants, blindly hoping for the best. We attempt instead to understand the lessons of practice and assist the people in drawing these same lessons. The struggle for the correct direction for revolutionary social practice is a theoretical struggle. However, it is essential to continually return to practice to test the correctness or incorrectness of a revolutionary political line. It is also essential to change our theory if practice

finds theory to be lacking.

Enough for generalities. Is the problem with our movement inadequate practice or inadequate theory? Well, to be frank, both have been rather shoddy. Those who point to our greatest weakness being in theory mention the longstanding tradition of "American pragmatism". They cite the fact that there has been historically too little development of a theoretical culture among leftists in the U. S. These critics say that the strong bias of revolutionaries in the U. S. toward limiting ourselves to narrow economic issues among the working class comes from this depreciation of theory. They recognize correctly that much that has been advanced as theory recently in our movement amounts to irrelevant dogmatists phrases and slogans or voluntaristic schemes not grounded in reality. They attribute these mistakes to "theoretical poverty".

While conceding that there is much validity to these points, we do not draw the same conclusions. We think the current brands of "theoretical poverty" flow from and reflect certain conditions of social reality including the following:

- 1) The development of political and class consciousness among the working class people in this country is still quite primitive.
- 2) This low level of consciousness is in turn reflected in a relatively low level of mass struggle.
- 3) There are indications of a new tendency toward increased spontaneous struggle by some sectors of the working class, especially in part of the industrial proletariat and other more socialized sectors. However, even the militancy of these spontaneous struggles still reflects a relatively low level of class consciousness. That is, very few workers even in these sectors show signs of developing the political outlook described by Lenin as advanced workers of the socialist type.
- 4) Communists, even when they have made some attempts for a few years to integrate themselves into workers' unions and other mass organizations of the class and into the social life of the masses, have not been successful. Revolutionaries have

found very few opportunities to test their theories in actual mass struggles and have found relatively few workers who are willing to act upon socialist agitation or to embrace the ideas put forward in socialist propaganda.

Under these circumstances theory (especially in regard to how to build a mass movement) is bound to be generalized and inexact. Worse, impatience can easily lead us to make sectarian errors that cannot so easily be corrected, either in regard to their effects upon the masses or upon the frame of mind of movement cadre. It is not surprising that the movement has scattered into warring sects, each defending its own idealist misinterpretation of reality. A more sober and modest approach that more correctly gauges the requirements and possibilities of the present must base its understanding on actual and successful (however modestly successful) intervention in mass struggles. The attempt to give mass struggles a class conscious direction must be grounded in an approach that can develop the correct basis for unity of the working class and oppressed masses and the correct non-sectarian basis for unity among the revolutionary forces. Both tasks demand that we show both patience and determination in facing up to our weaknesses and divisions. The impatience shown by communists under the influence of such conditions of isolation from the masses of working people must be replaced by a more mature outlook if we are to win their confidence and trust.

The best safeguard against the idealism that flows from our isolation is that the struggle <sup>for</sup> theoretical clarity concern itself primarily with confronting the obstacles that arise from attempting in our practice to break out of our isolation and to gain a hearing among the masses. Successful non-sectarian experiences in mass struggles are a prerequisite now to developing the ability to correct the errors of the past and in moving ahead to develop a non-sectarian theoretical perspective. By errors we mean both ultra-left and right errors. For these reasons we believe that the content of communist work during

this period and for a long time to come should reflect the real interconnection of our theoretical and practical work. The question of whether theory or practice is primary at a given time must be answered by our ability to develop a sound orientation based on the actual conditions of material reality, not on our wishful thinking. If we are to achieve such an orientation, our theoretical struggles must always be grounded in the experience of the working class and in our experience working in the social reality that confronts the masses. It is in this sense that we say that in general practice is primary.

This is our view of the principal needs of the Marxist-Leninist movement. It is also our view of what the orientation of BASOC should be once it has established a workable level of unity. We do think, however, that the lack of a sufficient level of unity can be crippling. We believe this is true even for an organization that puts its principal emphasis on being involved in mass struggles. Many people are not about to commit themselves to carrying out the work of an organization until they have some assurance that its general/theoretical orientation is sound, particularly after the experience of numerous communist sects in recent years whose theoretical inadequacies led from one mistake to another.

If an anti-sectarian perspective is to be developed by BASOC and other communist forces, it must be a very consciously held theoretical orientation. It is only in this way that our movement can deepen the framework of a revolutionary approach. We cannot rely simply/mindedly on the absence of an orientation, or on the tendency to put aside all differences and immerse ourselves in practical work in hopes that when the dust settles the correct orientation will win out spontaneously. Further experience may be necessary before some communists are won away

from a sectarian approach, but experience in and of itself is seldom sufficient to defeat incorrect ideas and to put political line on a correct footing. If that were so, how could we explain the errors of PLP, RCP, CP(M-L) and some of the other groups that have been involved for years in mass struggles, apparently without<sup>their</sup> learning very much?

It is only through conscious political struggle over theory and the summation of the experience of our movement that the lessons of practice can be grasped and mistaken ideas and political line corrected. Our committee has put the main emphasis now within BASOC during this early stage into combatting the tendency to belittle the importance of a sound political line. We feel such a tendency is an over-reaction to a healthy realization of the sectarian sins of the movement. The realization of the need for the communist movement to base itself firmly in the struggle to carry out its practical tasks among the masses is correct, but we should avoid being one-sided with this conclusion. We will not learn very much from our practice among the masses unless we are attempting to put a political line on communist work into practice. We must try to give political direction to our mass practice.

We have pushed within BASOC for moving ahead to develop unity on basic questions because we believe that some minimal level of agreement on our fundamental direction and approach is necessary. We may have seemed one-sided in the process of struggling over this question. We may have failed to emphasize our own agreement with the basic long-run perspective of concentrating our work primarily around the achievement of mass practical tasks. <sup>If so,</sup> it is because we believe that the approach does not have to be haphazard and empiricist in order to avoid sectarian errors. Instead we believe that in fact the correct approach must be founded on a consciously developed political perspective. We have tried to contribute to the development of such an approach through the work of our committee.