

# *Chicago Workers' Voice*

## Theoretical Journal Issue #15



Published by the *Chicago Worker's Voice*, P.O. Box 11542, Chicago 60611

November 9, 1998

Price: \$3.00

ISSN 1084-1717

### **\*The Bolshevik Agrarian Program, Part IV**

### **\*The MLP's Workplace Organizing: Part I, Work in the Trade Unions**

### **\*News from Buffalo: Rally Protests Murder of Abortion Provider**

### **\*Review: Video Documentary *Struggles in Steel***

#### **Contents**

Editorial Guide, by Jake.....	2
The Bolshevik Agrarian Program, Part IV, by Barb.....	3
MLP Organizing in the Workplace, Part I: Work in the Trade Unions, by Jake.....	29
MLP Second Congress Resolution on Organizing in the Workplace.....	34
Ben replies on the history of the MLP: Being disliked by the "major players" was to our credit!.....	37
Buffalo rallies against murder of abortion provider.....	40
Review of the video documentary "Struggles in Steel," by Jack Hill.....	42

## Editorial Guide to issue #15

by Jake

This issue of Chicago Workers' Voice Theoretical Journal features an end and a beginning.

Barb's series on the Bolshevik Agrarian Program concludes with Part IV, while Jake presents the first article on the MLP's workplace organizing. This article discusses the MLP's trade union policy. The next article in the series will highlight the non-trade union forms developed by the MLP as it organized on the shop floor.

We are also printing an article from Ben in Seattle. This is a part of a message thread from the Leninist-International list on the internet. In this article, Ben replies to another member of the list and makes the case that being hated by the reformist big-shots of the mass movements is not really a bad thing. Ben also gives a brief reply to the other's charge that the MLP had a "suspicious

history." We will continue discussion of the "suspicious" history of the MLP in the next issue, and we will likely publish other parts of this thread as it touches on some of the controversial issues in the history of the MLP's predecessor organizations, issues that the MLP did not discuss adequately in its lifetime.

Jack Hill reviews a video documentary on racism in the steel industry and the steelworkers' union.

Finally, we are presenting a report on an important demonstration that took place in Buffalo on Oct. 31. The sniper murder of Dr. Slepian is the latest terrorist act of "pro-life" fascists. We obtained this article from the internet. The author of the report is a pro-choice activist from Buffalo.

Subscribe to *Chicago Workers' Voice Theoretical Journal*

Subscriptions \$15 per year, published quarterly  
\$3/issue from vendor

Mailing address:

CWV

P.O. Box 11542

Chicago IL 60611

E-mail address: [mlbooks@mcs.com](mailto:mlbooks@mcs.com)

Web site: <http://www.mcs.com/~mlbooks>

***From Baba to Tovarishch:***

***The Bolshevik Revolution and  
Soviet Women's Struggle for Liberation***

Published by

*Chicago Workers' Voice*

P.O. Box 11542

Chicago, IL 60611

Price: \$15.00 (includes shipping)

# The Bolshevik Agricultural Policy, Part IV War Communism (continued)

by Barb, Chicago

**“We tell the *kulaks*: We have nothing against you either, but hand over your surplus grain, don’t profiteer and don’t exploit the labour of others. Until you do so we shall hit you with everything we’ve got.” (1)**

With the SRs out of the government and their influence on agrarian policy removed, the Bolsheviks immediately intensified methods of grain collection. Decrees of August, 1918 authorized trade unions, factory committees, town and rural soviets to organize food detachments of “workers and poorest peasants” to visit grain-producing provinces “to obtain grain at fixed prices or requisition it from *kulaks*.” Half the grain obtained was assigned to the organizations which sent out the detachments; the other half was handed over to the government for general distribution. Rural soviets, Poor Peasants Committees, and trade unions were instructed to organize similar detachments to bring in the harvest. Rural co-ops and other organizations were mandated not to release manufactured goods to any district or village except upon payment of at least 85% of the value in agricultural produce (Carr, II, 148-49). Requisitioning was ultimately extended to other foodstuffs, such as sugar, potatoes, meat, fish, seeds and oils, and even to peasant handicrafts. This struck a particularly sensitive nerve since the peasant’s craft had always been a reserve which insured his survival during bad times.

These were militant measures but not, the Bolsheviks insisted, “a war on the countryside” as the Left-SRs accused. The new Bolshevik Minister of Agriculture (Tsyurupa) justified these actions, perhaps a bit sanguinely:

**We do not regard these detachments ... merely as a military force; we see in [them] people who go into the country armed, it is true, but at the same time as agitators who will conduct propaganda in the country, who will carry our ideas into the country (Carr, II, 149).**

Lenin’s later assessment was bluntly candid:

**Under this peculiar War Communism we**

**actually took from the peasant all his surpluses -- and sometimes even a part of his necessities -- to meet the requirements of the army and sustain the workers. Most of it we took on loan, for paper money. But for that, we could not have beaten the landowners and capitalists in a ruined small-peasant country (32, “The Tax in Kind,” 342).**

Peasant resistance was often fierce, even among Bolshevik supporters who fought against the Whites. Too often, even the small reserves and seed stocks of the mid-sized farmers were seized. Consequently, the peasants fought back with their only weapons: concealment of grain and stock and refusal to sow more land than necessary to feed their families.

The Bolsheviks tried other experiments to ameliorate this desperate situation. They worked out a forerunner of the “tax in kind,” later to become a keystone of the NEP, which proposed a fairer grain collection based on ability to pay, but it remained stillborn. They devised another plan to fix the total amount of grain needed and apportion this among local districts which were responsible for fulfilling their quotas. Ironically, this harked back to the old commune system of collective responsibility under the tsars. It did not alleviate forcible seizure but merely relieved the central government of some of the burden of tax collection. It was also urged that all manufactured goods be requisitioned for trade. Prices for grain and consumer goods were continually juggled to lure the peasants to sell or trade their grain to the government. But in the end, it was necessary to threaten harsh penalties for peasants who refused to hand over surpluses, such as property or stock confiscation. On the other hand, the collection cadres were at risk of even being shot for improper accounting or for alienating the population (28, “Theses on the Food Question,” 44-46).

## Collectivization

**“The solution lies only in socialised farming.” (2)**

The turn toward the poor peasants in the summer of 1918 (i.e., the Poor Peasants Committees) was linked with the Bolsheviks’ initial aim to establish large-scale

agriculture since it was the poorer peasants who were perceived to be the most indifferent to individual proprietorship. With the SRs gone, agrarian policy took a decisive swing back to original Party principles. The first major, purely Bolshevik agricultural decree, issued in February, 1919, boldly proclaimed

**the transition from individual to collective forms of the utilization of the land [and that] all forms of individual utilization of land could be regarded as transitory and obsolete** (Carr, II, 154).

It described its purpose as

**the creation of a single productive economy to furnish the Soviet republic with the largest quantity of economic goods with the lowest expenditure of the people's labour** (154-55).

Collectivization was the "next step" in the class war against the rural capitalists which the Poor Peasants Committees had begun. The creation of the PPCs had marked the peasants' "October"; Lenin insisted that it had "transferred our revolution on to those socialist rails on which the working class of the towns wanted to place it firmly and decisively in [their] October" (Carr, II, 154). However, he feared that if this second step were not taken, the Peasant Revolution very likely might end where earlier European peasant revolutions had ended:

**It has not yet touched the stronger, the more modern enemy of all toilers -- capital. It therefore threatens to end as abruptly as the majority of revolutions in western Europe, where a temporary alliance of town workers and the whole peasantry was successful in sweeping away the monarchy, in sweeping away the remnants of mediaevalism, in sweeping the land more or less clean of landowners' property and landowners' power, but never succeeded in uprooting the very foundations of the power of capital** (Carr, II, 153).

Different forms of collective farming were encouraged. There were the model government or Soviet farms (*Sovkhoz*), which were run by the State and employed hired labor. These were to be the "agricultural factories" formed from pre-existing large estates which used ad-

vanced technology to grow specialized (export) crops, such as sugar-beets or flax. There were the new-style communes (*kolkhozy*) in which peasants united to cultivate undistributed confiscated land, sharing in the labor and proceeds. In addition, there were the *artels*, in which production was individual but marketing was shared. These *artels* could involve the old communes (*mir*), from which peasants had chosen not to withdraw their individual plots (*otrubs*), or could be cooperative societies of autonomous farms (*khutors*).

The "model statute" for agriculture was undoubtedly idealistic and represented the Bolsheviks' first flush of easy victory and high hopes of a European revolution which would enable socialist construction to proceed at a rapid pace. As Carr puts it, the vision of the *kolkhozy* seemed to breathe "the pure spirit of primitive communism" -- or perhaps more precisely -- the communism of the future:

**He who wishes to enter a commune renounces in its favour all personal ownership of money, the means of production, cattle and, in general, of all property required for the conduct of a communist economy....Every member of the commune must give all his strength and all his capacities to the service of the commune....The commune takes from every member according to his strength and capacities, and gives to him according to his real needs** (II, 152).

The government allocated a considerable sum for the encouragement of the *kolkhozy* (the "thousand-million rubles fund") and also promised subsidies to all workers' associations or village groups on the condition of a "transition from individual to common cultivation and harvesting of the soil" (Carr, II, 153). At this time, the Bolsheviks were convinced that "the ruination left by the war simply does not allow us to restore the old small-scale peasant farms" (28, "1st Congress of Land Depts.," 343). The hundreds of thousands of returning prisoners of war were envisioned as being enthusiastic communalists. Lenin mused that these peasants would take inspiration from the advanced war technology and transpose that into a vision of large-scale agriculture run by similar technology.

While propaganda for collectivized agriculture continued to be enthusiastic, results were disappointing. The *kolkhozy* was the least successful form, chiefly because by now most of the best land had already been redistributed, and what was left for communal farming was inferior. As for the landless peasants (*latraks*), they

preferred to hire out on the *Sovkhozy* as laborers rather than join communes, although that alternative was only by default. There weren't many State farms and they were not very large, for the peasants had already divided up too many of the old estates. In addition, they were poorly equipped and ill-managed. In the autumn of 1918, Lenin estimated that there were still only "some hundreds of state-supported agricultural communes and Soviet farms," few more than before the October Revolution (Carr, II, 152). In terms of the future, this boded ill:

**The vast majority of landowners' land had been subjected to partition, and there was reason to fear the disappearance of large-scale production in agriculture. Apart from this the danger existed of a great strengthening of the ideals of petty ownership (Carr, II, 153).**

The food shortage in the cities threatened the very existence of the urban proletariat who were flooding the countryside hoping to find food. Therefore, a new "exceptional" decree allowed the trade unions and urban co-ops to store and transport foodstuffs for their own members. This, in turn, led to an interesting experiment. Industrial enterprises, city soviets, and trade unions could acquire land and organize farms to supply their own needs. These "factory farms" were worked by rural labor, like other *Sovkhozy*, but were supplemented by urban labor. As Carr points out, this novel measure underlined the Bolsheviks' contention that "the adequate feeding of the towns was ultimately incompatible with a system of small peasant agriculture" (II, 155). By 1920, these "factory farms" would comprise fully one half of all Soviet farms.

### Socialism as Distribution

**"We shall establish proper prices for goods, we shall establish a monopoly on grain, on textiles and on all products; and then the people will say: 'Yes, the distribution of labour, the distribution of bread and other products inaugurated by socialism is better than it was before'." (3)**

The early period of War Communism was characterized by the State monopoly on grain collection and distribution -- "Bread Socialism." Its three slogans were: centralization of food work, unity of the proletariat, and organization of the poor peasants. The chief concern was

to feed the non-agricultural population -- the army and the urban proletariat which supplied the army with war materiel. A poor harvest, drought, and localized famine made the situation increasingly critical, and steps had to be both bold yet cautious. Only the poor peasants could reliably detect grain hoarding, but the approach toward them had to be very tolerant because they were constantly being reinfected by old bourgeois mores. Therefore, the Bolsheviks had to offer rewards or "bribes" -- lower prices, bonuses for grain collection, etc. Lenin never fooled himself that the poor and laboring peasants had, in the space of a few months, acquired any "socialist" ideals. Their economic status put them in a revolutionary position, but their political consciousness had not magically increased since October:

**When the old society perishes, its corpse cannot be nailed up in a coffin and lowered into the grave. It disintegrates in our midst; the corpse rots and infects us....[The] exploiters...[bribe] the poor peasants by permitting the latter to make money out of illicit distilling or...by selling at profiteering prices....We cannot blame the poor peasants for this, for we know that they have been enslaved for hundreds, thousands of years, that they have suffered from serfdom and from the system which was left by serfdom in Russia. Our approach to the poor peasants must consist not only in the guns directed against the *kulaks*, but also in the propaganda of enlightened workers who bring the strength of their organisation into the countryside (27, "Session of C.E.C., Moscow Soviet & Trade Unions," 434-36).**

The World War and the Civil War had created a unique situation; yet, during this period, the Bolsheviks seemed convinced that they were not just saving the populace from death, or even just saving the proletarian government, but that they really were creating socialism -- albeit it was a road to socialism which, through dire necessity, had led the country in an unforeseen direction. It was, in fact, an ultra-left concept of socialism which skipped over the matter of production and was solely based on distribution:

**The proper and equitable distribution of bread -- that is what constitutes the basis of socialism today....In this matter of the food supply we have the very essence of the**

**whole socialist system** (27, "5th All-Russia Congress of Soviets," 519, 524).

It is tempting to look at these assertions as another example of Lenin's rhetorical hyperbole, which he sometimes employed to emphasize a point or to rally support, such as his remarks that in electrification of the countryside lay the basis of socialism, or in nationalization of the banks, or in cooperatives, etc. Lenin also asserted that "Socialism has ceased to be a matter of party differences and has become a practical issue; it is a question of whether we can hold out against the *kulaks*, by allying ourselves with the peasants who do not profiteer in grain" (27, "5th All-Russia Congress of Soviets," 521). At the time he was commenting on the naivete of the Bolsheviks and their love of theorizing and arguing, but he also meant both practical and political specifics.

By "proper and equitable distribution," he meant distribution of food on the basis of work done and class position -- not really, as sometimes interpreted, the "communist" ideal of "to each according to his needs" -- except on the few actual communes. There were, at times, up to 20 different ration categories. So that "proper and equitable distribution" really depended on class war against the rural bourgeoisie in order to collect the surplus grain and distribute it to the workers, soldiers and poor peasants. This much is realistically grounded. However, he also meant that distribution implied a type of comradesly (or "proletarian") exchange between city and countryside. And in truth, this was wishful thinking since there was mainly coercion and confiscation and very little "trade," exchange being largely based on credit and promissory notes -- "slips of colored paper." The idea of a "proletarian" relationship was enthusiastically pursued, yet it was difficult to convince the peasants that they were "lending" grain to their "brother" workers. And the *subbotniks*, or voluntary work days which were encouraged in the countryside, were never as successful as in the urban areas.

The concept of "socialism" which characterizes War Communism does seem somewhat to reverse classical Marxism which holds that (worker-controlled) large-scale production must form the basis of socialism. Proper distribution can only be achieved in a society of plenty, and the proper relationship between town and country can only be achieved when there are enough products to be exchanged. Marx was insistent that:

**Production, distribution, exchange and consumption...all form parts of a whole, differences within a unity. Production pre-**

**dominates over all other factors. From it the process begins each time anew** (Carr, II, 6).

Marx also stated that it was only "vulgar socialism" which "revolves primarily round questions of distribution" and believes that equalization of distribution, not socialization of production, is the goal of socialism (6). Yet "reverses" is perhaps too strong a word for, given the circumstances, the Bolsheviks had no choice but to feed the people and win the war. Carr calls the Bolsheviks' emphasis on collection and distribution a "tragic fallacy," yet based on a reasonable assumption. That is, Russia had always been a grain-exporting country until the two succeeding wars cut off major granaries in the Ukraine and Siberia (II, 172). And it was well-known that there were huge stockpiles of grain stashed away in other grain-rich areas.

Still, the theories behind War Communism did leap ahead of reality in an ultra-left fashion. This fact Lenin certainly recognized later on (and at this time, there was still hope of a bail-out from a European revolution). The realities of the Civil War and ever-increasing famine had brought the country to a life and death crisis. Even though the White Guards would surely be defeated, if the bread policy did not succeed, the proletariat were in danger of being extinguished. So in this sense, future industrial productivity would be doomed, and socialism could never be created.

The Bolshevik agrarian policy was an up-hill struggle because collection of grain took precedence over all else. The peasants became less and less enthusiastic about combining into communes or joining the State farms. As Lenin put it, "The peasant thinks if there is a big farm, that means he will again be a farm-hand" (29, "8th Congress of the R.C.P.(B.)," 210). A year after his first estimate, there were still only 3,536 *Sovkhozy*, 1,961 *kolkhozy*, and 3,696 *artels* (30, "Economics and Politics in the Era of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat," 109). In light of the vastness of the nation, this was insignificant. Moreover, it was not at all clear that production was any better on these large enterprises than on private farms, for there was not enough equipment to work them properly and the work ethic was poor. Still, the government believed in their future. In order to overcome peasant resistance to the State farms, exceptions were reluctantly made to the original ban on owning private animals, birds and vegetable plots. This was a matter dear to the peasant heart, and it also helped feed people. In addition, the "thousand-million rubles fund" was extended to all peasants, regardless of class origin.

After only six months of existence, not only had the Poor Peasants Committees succeeded in bringing in the

grain, but they had done their job so well that the *kulaks*, as a distinct class, had almost ceased to exist; they had become middle peasants. There had never been a policy to completely expropriate the *kulak*, for part of his accumulation came from his own labor, and his farming skills were sorely needed. On the other hand, the number of poor peasants had turned out to be less numerous than the Bolsheviks had foreseen, and the PPCs had had to rely heavily on urban proletarian assistance. Because of the SR-based land reforms, far more poor peasants than anticipated also had achieved middle-peasant status, and they had not led the drive to collectivize as the Bolsheviks had hoped.

Lenin had always emphasized that the Poor Peasants Committees had been a transitional measure. (4) Now that they had accomplished their mission, attention focused on the formation of a farm laborers union of which the PPCs were a kind of “proletarian” prototype. The union would have two main functions: to prevent capitalists from re-emerging from the (temporarily) vanquished *kulak* class and to detect local abuses of power, such as forcing the peasants into communes. It does not appear that, at this time, much was actually accomplished on this front.

### The Turn Toward the Middle Peasants

**“We have always said that we do not seek to force socialism on the middle peasant.” “We foresee the inevitable doom of the small peasant, but...it is not our mission to hasten it...” (5)**

The demise of the Poor Peasants Committees concurred with a new policy toward the middle peasants, presented at the 8th Party Congress in March, 1919. This policy reflected the turn of emphasis from distribution to production. The middle peasants had always been a serious consideration, but during the first year of War Communism, they had been lost in the shuffle, lumped in with the enemy *kulaks* as hoarders. During the struggle against the landlords, and also later during grain requisitioning, Party strategy had been to neutralize the middle peasant: “To bring him under control of the grain monopoly and fight him when he violates the monopoly and conceals grain” (28, “Moscow Party Workers’ Meeting,” 203). Now it was necessary to form a bloc, an alliance, with this strata and to view the “working peasant” as “the comrade and equal of the socialist worker, his most faithful ally, his blood brother in the fight against the yoke of capital” (30, “Economics and Politics in the Era of the

Dictatorship of the Proletariat,” 114).

Production simply had to be increased. Because the peasants continued to show reluctance to sow when the fruits of their labor would only be appropriated, and since the drive to communalize had achieved only minimal success, the only alternative was to placate and encourage the small farmer. Moreover, the decimated proletariat was too weak to support the new regime all by itself, so that the political loyalty of the middle peasants was crucial.

This new attitude was not a “retreat” from Bolshevik policy, as some accused. Rather, it was a return to the original Party line, a correction of some of the excesses and violations of communist principles for a “painless transition to socialism,” which the Civil War and War Communism had unavoidably produced. The two main points of this new policy were: all available aid be given to the middle peasants and no coercion whatsoever be applied against them. Lenin continued to emphasize Engels’ strong views against the application of compulsion to the middle peasant. (6) The Marxist view of this strata was still that as expressed shortly after the Revolution:

**The middle peasants for decades before the revolution lived worse than the workers. Before the revolution their life was one of unrelieved want and oppression. Our policy towards these middle peasants is one of agreement. The socialist revolution means equality for all the working people; it would be unfair for the urban worker to receive more than the middle peasant, who does not exploit the labour of others by hiring labour or profiteering; the peasants suffer from greater want and oppression than the workers and fare even worse than the workers (27, “5th All-Russia Congress of Soviets,” 523).**

Lenin concluded that small peasant economy would “continue to exist for quite a long time after the beginning of the proletarian revolution” (29, “8th Congress,” 217). Since at this time, the commune could not show the peasants a good enough example to make them want to participate, Party policy was to be: “If you are on the side of Soviet power we shall not drive you into a commune by force” (29, “Session of the Petrograd Soviet,” 32). The ban was even lifted on former landowners taking part in the communes, provided they had proven that they were “decent people.” There was also a renewed effort to enlist more non-Party intellectuals and technicians into

agriculture where they were sorely needed, as they were in industry.

Lenin described the peasants' slogan at this time as "Long live Soviet power, but down with the *communia!*" and their view as:

**We are Bolsheviks, but not Communists. We are for the Bolsheviks because they drove out the landowners; but we are not for the Communists because they are opposed to individual farming** (32, "3rd Congress of the CI," 486).

He explained that although

**the name "agricultural commune" is a great one; it is associated with the conception of communism...the communes have only succeeded in provoking a negative attitude among the peasantry, and the word "commune" has even at times become a call to fight communism** (30, "1st Congress of Agricultural Communes and Agricultural *Artels*," 198).

Moreover, the peasants had begun an all-out attack against the *Sovkhozy*. Because bourgeois agricultural specialists and managers had to be retained to run them, abuse of privilege was rampant. Lenin noted manifestations of extreme distrust, resentment and rejection of the State farms because of the old exploiters and former landowners who had "wormed their way" into them. He interpreted the peasants' reasoning thus: "We do not want state farms...for the old exploiters are to be found there" (30, "1st Conference on Party Work in the Countryside," 148). The peasants began to murmur that the *Sovkhozy* were nothing more than "a restoration of the great estates under the Soviet flag" (Carr, II, 166), and that to work on them was only "a new kind of serfdom." (7) Lenin agreed that the State farms often played a "nasty role." He fully recognized the abuse of power and the bureaucracy in them caused by old ways of thinking. But the Bolsheviks could not turn their energies into the improvement of the existing *Sovkhozy*, let alone the creation of new ones, because this would disrupt crucial food production.

The problem was: how to improve the lot of the small farmers and enlist their loyalty when the concrete help which they needed -- machinery, tractors, seed, fertilizer and household goods -- could not really be granted, as Lenin readily admitted. Still, the State promised to do the best it could. It vowed to "regularize" the peasants' split

holdings and to set up centers for the repair and sharing of farm implements. As much as possible of the relief originally granted to the poor peasants was also extended to the middle peasants in the areas of urban support, lessened taxes and prices, and leniency in collecting overdue taxes. In addition, "The middle peasants must be taxed very mildly, so that the sum levied is fully within their means and not burdensome to them" (29, "8th Congress of the R.C.P.(B.)," 219). The confidence of the middle peasants had to be earned: "Until then, we are pupils of the peasants and not their teachers" (29, "8th Congress," 211). Evidently, urban communists were rushing to the countryside to try communal farming and, in general, the peasants highly resented the unskilled urban brigades which were sent out to help organize agriculture and who, too often, arrogantly ordered the peasants about. Ruthless punishment was promised for any arbitrary requisitioning or pressure on the middle peasants to communalize: "Nothing is more stupid than the very idea of applying coercion in economic relations with the middle peasant" (211). Moreover, the middle peasants must be given more of a voice in the rural soviets and other local peasant bodies.

The Stolypin Reforms had really been the cause of this dilemma by giving the peasants their own small plot of land. Even if now the land was not technically "owned" by the peasant, he still treasured his role as a "private proprietor." This situation had been exacerbated by the SR land reforms since their insistence on "labor norms" had tended to create and then to equalize small farms. If the period of bourgeois capitalism had gone on longer, undoubtedly *kulak* buying out of many small plots would have created larger estates, which is what Lenin had originally pictured as the ideal "capitalist" scenario. However, circumstances had dictated that the proletariat must seize power before this could happen. So what existed in reality was a vast nation of millions of very small farms from four to eight dessiatines, employing perhaps one draft animal. Lenin admitted that the mistake had been the attempt at a

**mechanical planting of *Sovkhozy* and communes with industry in ruins, without the slightest technical prerequisites (not to speak of political preparation) and without taking into account the needs of the middle peasant** (Carr, II, 160).

Given this situation, propaganda for the *kolkhozy* and *Sovkhozy* decreased, and the emphasis became to unite the small farms into *artels*, into cooperatives.



Still, despite their weak position, the *Sovkhozy* and *kolkhozy* were to present themselves as “models.” They were mandated to assist and educate the small farmer in all ways possible (the *subbotnik* idea). As Lenin stated, “These people [small farmers] will never become socialists by conviction, honest to goodness socialists. They will become socialists when they see there is no other way” (28, “Moscow Party Workers’ Meeting,” 212). He defended Party policy on these grounds:

**Otherwise the small peasant will not notice the difference between the former government and the dictatorship of the Soviets...if the proletarian state power does not act in this way, it will not be able to maintain itself** (Carr, II, 166).

But with this new policy, Lenin emphasized that it must not be forgotten that the middle peasant had two faces. He had suffered like the proletariat, but his consciousness was not that different from the *kulak's*. The small farmer might not exploit hired labor, but since he had the potential of producing more food than he needed, he could easily become an exploiter of the hungry worker. There was a real danger that this increased governmental support would drive more and more of the middle peasants’ surplus onto the black market. Lenin explained the fundamental contradiction:

**The peasant who lives by his own labour is a loyal ally of Soviet power, and the worker regards such a peasant as his equal, the workers’ government does everything it can for him....But the peasant who makes use of the surplus grain he possesses to exploit others is our enemy. To satisfy the basic needs of a hungry country is a duty to the state....”I have raised this grain, it is my product, and I have a right to do business with it,” the peasant reasons out of habit...But we say this is a crime against the state** (30, “1st Conference on Party Work in the Countryside,” 149).

### Transition from War to Peace

**“We are now declaring war on the relics of inertness, ignorance and mistrust that prevail among the peasant masses.”** (8)

As the country turned from “the phase of war to

economic development,” the Party began to deal with the dilemma of simultaneously reviving both industry and agriculture, which were interdependent:

**In order to revive the country it is necessary to supply it with goods from the town in normal quantity; but, in order in its turn to produce these, the town must be supplied with a definite quantity of raw material and food** (Carr, II, 171).

The Bolsheviks remained very hopeful regarding the countryside. Lenin confidently stated that the peasantry had evolved from “neutrally hostile” to “neutrally sympathetic.” In line with assisting the small farmer, great plans were promoted at the 8th All-Russia Congress of Soviets at the end of 1920. Chief among these was the scheme for nationwide electrification -- “*Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country*” (31, “8th All-Russia Congress of Soviets,” 516). Electrification would indeed garner tremendous prestige for the Bolsheviks. Such a gift would be dazzling to the peasants! It was also obviously a prerequisite to the eventual transition to large-scale agriculture. In fact, Lenin enthusiastically predicted that electrification would allow “an immediate transition to socialism from the state of affairs predominating in Russia” (32, “The Tax in Kind,” 350).

The other major gift would be tractors -- “the most important means of effecting a radical change in the old farming methods” (31, “8th All-Russia Congress,” 482). Since at the time Soviet industry could not supply them -- there were only two tractor factories -- these were to be obtained through foreign concessions, Germany being viewed as the chief supplier. Due to her position as the loser in the Versailles Treaty, it was felt that she (even her “Black Hundreds”!) would be sympathetic to the new Soviet regime. “Bring us hundreds of tractors and make as much as three hundred percent on each ruble if you like” (478), the Bolsheviks were prepared to offer. Concessionaires would be paid in grain and virgin lands which the regime could not cultivate.

At this Congress a new agricultural bill was introduced, which gave the small farmer even more freedoms yet retained measures of compulsion. Both factors elicited protest from many Party members, but Lenin insisted on keeping to a cautious middle road. Far from becoming “models,” Lenin stated, the “collective farms are still in such a state of disorganization, in such a deplorable position, that they deserve the name of almshouses” (527). Therefore, peasants were granted the

right to withdraw their land from the communes and re-establish autonomous farms. However, they were mandated to adapt methods employed by the more efficient farmers "governing the principal methods of mechanical cultivation of the fields and of improving meadows, sowing and the methods of preserving the natural fertility of the soil" (526). Practical restrictions were included, such as that these regulations not be unachievable nor involve undue risk for the farmer nor be undertaken without state assistance in improved implements, etc. Also the regulations would be tailored carefully to the peculiarities of each producing region. To ensure that all appropriate land was sown and to prevent seed grain from being consumed, Gubernia Sowing Committees were established. The "all-state plan of obligatory sowing," Carr describes as "the last still-born product of the agricultural polices of war communism" (II, 172).

An attempt was also made to shore up the rural Communist propaganda units who were not doing a very good job. Given the war, the vastness of the country, the lack of communications, and the unrelenting ignorance of the peasantry, they could hardly be blamed. One important measure was to transform the urban newspaper *Bednota* ("The Poor") into a proletarian/peasant publication and circulate it widely throughout the countryside in an attempt to encourage "brotherhood" between the two strata.

### **Summary: Bandits, Bagmen, and the Black Market**

**"Most of the peasants are feeling only too severely the effects of famine, cold and excessive taxation. It was in the main, for this, that most of the speakers upbraided the central government, directly or indirectly."**  
(9)

The government's best intentions and efforts were too little and too late. At the end of the Civil War in late 1920, the situation went something like this. Agricultural production had declined since the October Revolution due to devastation of the countryside, loss of man-power, destruction of livestock, shortage of implements and fertilizers, disruption of transportation, etc. The poor harvests since the Revolution were not only the result of lack of incentive but of drought and lack of sowing seed, which had been confiscated or consumed. By 1920, the cultivated area was less than 3/5s, total output only 1/2, and livestock only 2/3s of pre-WWI totals (Avrich, p. 10). There had been a decline in specialized or cash crops (formerly the province of the great estates) and a turn to

food crops consumed by the peasant family or sold on the black market. Moreover, it was estimated that fully 1/3 of the 1920 harvest was concealed by the peasants (Carr, II, 167). While the Bolsheviks vowed not to "coerce," the middle peasants obviously felt they were being coerced and turned against the government. There was, in effect, a producers' strike.

Banditry was also a serious problem. Due to the demobilization of the army, hundreds of thousands of soldiers straggled back to the countryside where there was no place for them, swelling the ranks of anti-government guerilla bands. Peasant uprisings and instances of banditry, which were hard to distinguish, rose sharply. These mainly took the form of ambushing and hijacking grain supplies. During the month before Kronstadt alone, 118 separate incidents were reported.

"Down with requisitioning!" "Away with food detachments!" "Don't surrender your surpluses!" were common slogans. Peasant officials flooded the government with petitions to stop the requisitioning. Antisemitism, always a latent peasant trait largely due to the influence of the reactionary church, reared its ugly head with the cry, "Down with the communists and the Jews!" The Communists and "Jews" were equated with the government. The peasants complained that the communist bureaucracy was living high off the hog while they suffered. The government -- including the food detachments and even the rural commissars -- was equated with the cities. The SRs encouraged the age-old peasant belief that any government interference represented the attack of the city on the sacred province of the countryside. A complete rupture between countryside and city threatened.

The middle peasants insisted on their right to sell their small surpluses. They could not be dissuaded from the black market because there were no manufactured goods to exchange for grain, and they became increasingly cynical about "paper promises." Consumer goods manufacture overall had fallen to less than 1/4 of pre-war levels, and for some necessities like cloth and shoes, from 1/10 to 1/20 (Avrich, 22). The halt of industry, the unemployment of workers, the breakdown of railroad transport of food to the cities, the lack of fuel, the rationing of food which resulted in starvation diets led to the exodus of hundreds of thousands of workers into the countryside. The total urban population had, by this time, decreased by a third.

From the outset had arisen the phenomenon of the "bagman" who tramped the countryside collecting food and reselling it to urban workers at exorbitant rates, first for money, then for household possessions or factory

items with which workers were paid "in kind" for their own use ("piece-selling"). The proletariat were helplessly exploited. For example, bread purchased from these profiteers was ten times the price of the scarce government bread. In return, the workers were stealing materials from their factories or illicitly manufacturing items there to trade for food. There was no doubt that, by the end of 1920, the black market had supplanted legal trade; some estimates put the ratio as high as by 80:20%. While the government continued to condemn the black market, it had no choice but to tolerate it, for the average worker could not exist without it. The differential rationing system, which supposedly operated on the principle of "essential service" to the regime, was constantly readjusted but satisfied few. (10) Almost no one in the cities had enough to eat. Carr concludes that the average manual worker -- one of the highest-rationed categories -- consumed only from 1/2 to 3/4 of his minimum caloric requirements (II, 242).

The constant two-way traffic from city to countryside had spread the discontent, and the urban proletariat, what was left of it, was also protesting. The workers were opposing the militarization of labor, the Taylor system in the factories -- as well as supporting peasant demands. They were also calling for more rations of food and clothing, the removal of roadblocks designed to control illegal trade, permission to make foraging trips into the countryside and to trade freely with the villagers, and the elimination of privileged rations for certain classes of workers and officials. The Workers Opposition groups and Trotsky's trade union faction were keeping the workers stirred up. Strikes and demonstrations took place in Moscow and Petrograd, which were exploited by the Mensheviks and the Right-SRs who were now openly calling for complete freedom to trade, the overthrow of the Bolsheviks, and the reconstitution of the Constituent Assembly. But also the lesser demands by peasant groups -- and also the Left-SRs, the WO, the Anarchists, and Trotsky -- who were merely calling for the end of requisitioning, a fixed tax in kind, and the freedom to trade surpluses -- was interpreted by Lenin as consciously or unconsciously masking a hidden agenda, i.e., a return to capitalism, because the regime was not out of danger from outside forces who wished to destroy it.

The Party managed to quell these revolts by granting many of the demands and by authorizing emergency food supplies. It also made an official promise to the workers to abandon forcible grain seizure and to implement a tax in kind in the near future. However, some form of State compulsion was still seen to be necessary to increase production. Although Lenin had begun to contemplate a

moderation of War Communism as early as November, 1920, the Bolsheviks still saw a resumption of the Civil War as an imminent danger. (11) So, although they realized that changes were at some point inevitable, they were loath to implement drastic measures too hastily. This was roughly the situation on the eve of Kronstadt.

Bourgeois critics have often accused the Bolsheviks of making "a virtue out of a necessity" or of deriving "principles out of expediency." However, serious questions have remained from this period. Were the poor peasants victorious in their "October" as the workers had been in theirs? Or were they defeated? If so, was it because it was an artificially created - and perhaps premature -- "revolution" prompted by desperate grain requisitioning and mandated by the government from "above?" The workers' October had overthrown the urban capitalists; it had put the first proletarian government in history into power. The workers' October had concurred with the peasants Democratic Revolution. The Democratic Revolution too had been successful, and the peasants fully recognized that their lot had improved with the freedom from landlord exploitation; in fact, Lenin maintained that the peasants' lot had really improved more than the workers'.

But what was at stake in the peasants' "October?" In theory, it promised that, with the overthrow of the rural capitalists, the *kulaks*, the small peasants would now be totally in control of agriculture. But in reality, it was the government which was in control of agriculture. The peasants saw the bottom line as being forced to give up both their profits and independence to furnish bread for the workers. They did not perceive that this second stage of their "Revolution" brought them any gains. In fact, they felt that what originally had been granted to them was being taken away. They felt exploited by the new government as they had been exploited in the past. This contradiction would come to a head in the tragic episode of Kronstadt.

### **Kronstadt**

**"The Kronstadt event -- was like a flash of lightning which threw more of a glare upon reality than anything else." (12)**

The Kronstadt Rebellion of March 1921, which took place on an island garrison-city outside of Petrograd, was the most serious internal crisis in Soviet history since the summer of 1918. Lenin termed it "the political expression of the economic crisis that beset Russian War Communism" (Getzler, 257). It "lit up" the bankruptcy of War

Communism by highlighting the intolerable living conditions of the masses after the devastation of two wars, extreme social breakdown and civil disorder, drought, crop failure, famine, and pestilence. It is necessary to give some attention to Kronstadt because it is a common perception that the rebellion directly impelled the NEP. As discussed above, the Bolsheviks had been reconsidering and readjusting their policies toward the peasantry for some time and had actually submitted a basic outline of the tax in kind to the Central Committee a few days before the mutiny. (13) Undoubtedly, however, Kronstadt hastened implementation.

The mutiny, led by the sailors, marked the culmination of peasant and proletarian unrest and growing dissatisfaction with the government. Society had reached an impasse which went something like this: The breakdown of industry and distribution had resulted in a lack of commodities to exchange with the peasantry for grain. This resulted in the refusal of the peasantry to deliver grain to the government and the growth of illicit private trade, inflated prices, worthless currency and overall urban hunger. This, in turn, resulted in the flight of workers from the cities to the country with the consequences of a further breakdown of industry, increased burdens on the land, and peasant resentment.

The Kronstadters insisted that the rebellion was a "non-party" action in the name of the peasants. Formerly, the military garrisoned on the island, and particularly the navy, had been mainly composed of the urban proletariat. However, the wars had diminished their numbers and, by this time, the military was heavily raw peasant recruits, so there had been constant and intimate contact with the countryside. On the other hand, of the 15 resolutions put forth in their manifesto, the *Petropavlovsk*, only a few had to do with the peasantry directly:

3. Freedom of assembly for ... peasant associations;
5. The liberation of ... peasants ... imprisoned in connection with ... peasant movements;
11. To give full right of action of the peasant over all the land ... and also the right to own livestock, which he must maintain and manage by his own resources, i.e. without employing hired labour ... to allow free small-scale production by individual labour;
15. To permit free handicraft production by one's own labor (Getzler, 213-14).

These demands sound very mild. As Lenin, said, they

were "nebulous slogans," characteristic of the petty-bourgeois, small producer element of society. The Kronstadters insisted that they were not demanding "free market relations," as were the Mensheviks, Right-SRs and liberals. Yet it was definitely interpreted as a disguised call for "unrestricted trade." This meant a return to all-out capitalism, and ruptured the "brotherhood" between the proletariat and peasant so desperately sought. It pitted the farmer against the worker. Moreover, it is obvious that items 3 and 5 would re-establish the SR-dominated *kulak* organizations. The only other economic resolutions put forth called for an end to the roadblocks set up to prevent food smuggling and more equalization of food rations. These matters, the Bolsheviks had already pretty much taken care of.

But it was not the economic or "peasant demands" which were really the issue. The Kronstadt affair had begun as a pressure group for reform and a reaction against War Communism, but it had quickly escalated into a political threat: an attempt to oust the Bolsheviks from power. In fact, the Kronstadters called their mutiny "the third revolution." In true anarchistic fashion, they believed that, by their example, this "revolution" would spread to the rest of the Union. Characterized by petty-bourgeois "democracy," they represented what the Bolsheviks had always considered the main danger to their regime.

"Red Kronstadt" had earned a definite status and prestige among the population as the "pride and glory of the Russian Revolution." It had amassed a proud history since the abortive mutinies of the sailors of 1905-06 with the subsequent vicious repression. After the February Revolution, the island had established one of the first soviets, which reportedly was a model of democracy, organization, and efficiency. The Kronstadters had been active in the abortive July rebellion; in fact, they had saved Petrograd during the attempted Kornilov putsch. They had been at the forefront in October, and had been the most reliable mainstay during the Civil War. The Kronstadters were the "aristocrats of the Revolution" whose credentials could not be faulted.

But the Kronstadters had always had a libertarian bent. In utopian fashion, they called their soviet, "the free republic of Kronstadt." They had always resisted the concept of a centralized Soviet which subordinated local soviets to its authority and, under the PRG, they had agitated for actual secession. Until the Bolsheviks finally gained control, its soviet had been dominated by Left-SRs, SR-Maximalists (non-party, anarcho-populists) and anarcho-syndicalists, with a representation of Menshevik-Internationalists. At the time of the mutiny, the Kronstadt

Bolsheviks were not only weakened by the influx of peasants into the Party, but had absorbed the ultra-left influences, i.e., leaned toward anarcho-communism. They were rendered impotent in face of the Kronstadters' Provisional Revolutionary Committee, which was set up without them. Some fled, some were temporarily jailed, but a sizeable number supported the PRC.

The Kronstadters regarded themselves as the "true revolutionaries," the true "communalists," and derided the Bolshevik leadership as the "commissarocracy with a militia." They saw themselves as returning to the "ideals" of the Revolution -- pre-October. They viewed their soviet as a true "revolutionary commune" in -- what they regarded as -- the manner of the Paris Commune, and indeed called themselves "Communards." The Kronstadters asserted that the present soviets did not express the will of the workers and peasants. They called for non-party soviets (sometimes expressed as multi-party soviets), and freedom for all other "left" political parties. This was, in a sense, a return to their past, or at the least to the future they had envisioned at the time of the October Revolution. It is debated whether their slogans literally called for "Soviets without the Bolsheviks" or "Soviets without the Communists." It seems their most common rallying cry was the old SR-Maximalist slogan: "All Power to the Soviets and Not to Parties." Their terms were that Bolsheviks could be elected to soviet positions, but only as individuals, not as party representatives. They called for the abolition of all "political," i.e., Bolshevik, departments and militias, the end of state subsidies to any parties, and for the separation of parties and State. They called for the liberation of all political prisoners of "socialist" parties and working class movements, and the complete autonomy of the trade unions. This meant, in effect, the dismantling of the Bolshevik government. They were not, however, calling for resumption of the CA, and they violently opposed the return of the Whites.

Whether the Bolsheviks needed to put down the rebellion with such vicious force is also a matter that has been endlessly debated. Hundreds lay dead on both sides, and it was undoubtedly a tragedy in all respects. Lenin concluded that the ordinary Kronstadters genuinely reflected peasant sentiment: "They do not want the White Guards and they do not want our state power either" (32, "10th Congress," 228). Attempting to place the rebellion within the political scope of the peasant movement, Avrich classifies it as closest to the old *Narodnik* anarcho-populism, whose vision had been not "socialist revolution" but "social revolution": "the ancient dream of a loose-knit federation of autonomous communes in which peasants

and workers would live in harmonious cooperation, with full economic and political liberty organized from below" (171). He also points out that the Kronstadters revealed the age-old peasant prejudices of Slavic nationalism which viewed with hostility any government, seeing it as an artificial body forcibly grafted on and responsible for the suffering of the people (174).

Nevertheless, Lenin believed that the "new power," regardless of whether it stood "just to the right of the Bolsheviks, or perhaps even to their 'left' -- you can't really tell, so amorphous is the combination of political groupings" was bound to serve as a "step-ladder," a "bridge" to "bourgeois counter-revolution" (32, "10th Congress of the R.C.P.(B.)," 184). There was good evidence that the rebellion, if not actually instigated by white guard forces at home and abroad, was exploited by them and encouraged by the European imperialists. (14) There appeared to be a real danger that Kronstadt might ignite a full-fledged peasant rebellion and exacerbate the volatile situation in the cities. The proletarian victory seemed in danger of being overturned.

Afterwards, except for the leaders who were executed or fled, the common Kronstadt sailors, soldiers and citizens were regarded as "erring brothers." Lenin concluded that the "lesson from Kronstadt" was that "in politics," what was needed was "a closing of the ranks," a tightening up of discipline "inside the party," an insistence on "the greatest firmness of the apparatus," the strengthening of a "good bureaucracy in the service of politics," and the stepping up of the "implacable struggle against the Mensheviks, the SRs and the Anarchists." "In economics," Kronstadt pointed to the need for "the widest possible *concessions* to the middling peasantry, notably "local free trade" (Carr, II, 257-58). A few months after Kronstadt, the Party tightened up social discipline, which the Mensheviks and SRs, of course, termed social "repression." In effect, organized political opposition to the regime was extinguished and, shortly after, all internal factions, such as the WO groups, were banned and threatened with expulsion from the Party. (15)

#### **The New Economic Policy (NEP): "Another Brest?"**

**"Either the peasantry comes to an agreement with us and we make economic concessions to it -- or we fight." (16)**

The NEP was introduced at the 10th Party Congress in March, 1921. The Party declared that the NEP would be "transitional measure" from the bankrupt conditions of War Communism to conditions allowing for socialist

growth. It had been established for a "long period of years," and its "fundamental lever" was the exchange of goods. It was a two-pronged policy: to increase industrial and agricultural production and to supply consumer goods to the masses, particularly to the peasantry. The State could only be rebuilt on the conditions of collecting a tax in grain and reviving product exchange.

### **The Tax in Kind**

The tax in kind was not a brand-new idea, for a similar law had been passed back in late October, 1918. Instructions had been issued, but the war had intervened which demanded grain requisitioning. However, Lenin pointed out that the tax in kind had acquired an entirely new standpoint. The first law had been based on meeting the needs of the State only. The second was based on meeting the needs of the small farmers. Lenin's draft read:

- 1. Satisfy the wish of the non-Party peasants for the substitution of a tax in kind for the surplus appropriation system (the confiscation of surplus grain stocks).**
- 2. Reduce the size of this tax as compared with last year's appropriation rate.**
- 3. Approve the principle of making the tax commensurate with the farmer's effort, reducing the rate for those making the greater effort.**
- 4. Give the farmer more leeway in using his after-tax surpluses in local trade, provided his tax is promptly paid up in full (32, "Rough Draft of Theses Concerning the Peasants," 133).**

While Party support for the tax in kind was unanimous, for it simply could not be denied that something drastic had to be done, many members worried that they would not be able to control petty-bourgeois trading and that capitalism would be restored. In Lenin's mind it was not even a question:

**We must satisfy the middle peasantry economically and go over to free exchange; otherwise it will be impossible -- economically impossible -- in view of the delay in the world revolution, to preserve the rule of the proletariat in Russia (32, "10th Congress," 225).**

He was confident that "We can allow free local exchange

to an appreciable extent, without destroying, but actually strengthening the political power of the proletariat," and that "things [c]ould be done so as to give maximum satisfaction to the middle peasantry, without damaging the interests of the proletariat" (32, "10th Congress," 220, 222).

NEP proposed a partial and very controlled capitalism. By no means did it imply "unrestricted trade," as some groups had called for. This "small capitalism" would be "hedged about with conditions." The challenge would be to "find the correct methods to direct the development of capitalism...into the channels of state capitalism to ensure its transformation into socialism in the near future." State capitalism was conceived as a step forward compared with the small proprietor, an "intermediary link" between small production and socialism" (32, "Tax in Kind," 350). State capitalism would form a "bloc, an alliance with the forces of communism against the petty-bourgeois element" (33, "New Times and Old Mistakes in New Guises," 25). (17)

The practical reality was that the government still had to receive a certain amount of grain to feed the army and workers. It could no longer do that by forcible requisitioning. Specifically, the way the new policy would work is that the tax in kind would constitute only about 1/2 of the formerly requisitioned grain amount. The other half would be obtained through trade with the peasant, who would ideally exchange his grain for the manufactured items of State (socialist) factories, or -- until this was possible -- local products.

The tax was to be calculated as a percentage of crops harvested and was to be progressive, graduated to fall more lightly on the poor and middle peasants and on worker farms. It would be calculated separately for different areas depending on productivity of the soil. Tax rebates would be granted to those who increased the area of land sown or productivity. Collective responsibility for taxes was abolished; each individual farmer now assumed responsibility. State aid regarding consumer goods and agricultural equipment would be extended no longer only to the poorest peasants but to anyone in exchange for surpluses voluntarily delivered in excess of the tax.

### **Freedom to Trade**

The problem still lay in how the peasants were to be supplied with goods in exchange for their grain. At this point they lacked the very basic necessities: textiles, shoes, matches, kerosine, etc. Since at this time, industry was almost shut down, several immediate measures were proposed. The government would sell off its gold reserves

to purchase consumer goods from abroad. Workers would continue to be paid "bonuses in kind," now specifically to trade for food. Trade could take any form the peasants desired, except illegal black market forms. (After-tax) grain, vegetables, crafts, etc. could be traded at local shops, markets and bazaars, or through co-ops, which would be the State's intermediaries. Peasants were encouraged to start cooperative, small-scale manufactories, cottage-industries, and even mines to increase the fund of consumer goods. The products of these petty artisans and "industrialists" would constitute their tax, and they would have the same legal security and freedom to trade as the farmers.

The restricted trade portion of the NEP was originally conceived as a barter method, or product exchange, which was still "a more or less socialist manner." After only a few months, the forces of the NEP had overwhelmed this -- perhaps naive -- intention. Lenin conceded that because "the exchange of goods broke loose," they had to retreat further, take "another step backwards...pass from state capitalism to the setting up of state regulation of regular buying and selling, of monetary circulation," i.e., "commodity" not "product" exchange (Carr, II, 334). A new currency was put into circulation, and financial institutions were adjusted to the demands of a more conventional market capitalism.

### The Concessions

The other important tenet of the NEP was the proposal to grant concessions to private and foreign capitalists. Again, this was an old idea thwarted by the Civil War. Previously, concessions had been regarded merely as a resumption of peaceful trade. However, since under the NEP the primary function of concessions would be to start up large-scale industry and furnish goods for the peasantry, it was envisioned that they would be a chief means of "implanting state capitalism." They too would be "hedged about with conditions;" they too would form "an agreement, an alliance, a bloc between the Soviet, i.e., proletarian, state power and state capitalism, against the small-proprietor" (32, "Tax in Kind," 345). Some of these concessions were to be agricultural in nature, leasing land that the Soviets could not develop. These schemes, along with electrification and the first attempts at State economic planning, would increase food, as well as over-all production. And, the Communists would learn from the concessionaires.

### Compulsion

The NEP still retained measures of compulsion on the peasantry, for it had to increase personal incentive to produce, yet at the same time control the petty-bourgeoisie. It was predicted that many peasants would resist paying even this greatly lessened tax in kind so that military-type organizations would still be necessary to collect the tax. Further, the peasants were mandated to use the profits they received from private trading to increase sowing area and to develop their farms. Except for offering incentives and rewards, how this was to be enforced was not spelled out. The Sowing Committees were revived and their sphere expanded. They were not only to enforce the sowing of all suitable land, but to devote themselves to improving methods of cultivation, assisting rural industries, encouraging local exchange of goods, and developing co-ops. Moreover, the compulsory labor service of War Communism was not entirely abolished. It was reserved for emergency situations, when volunteerism could not accomplish the harvesting of cash crops such as beets or forestry products.

The NEP also necessitated a change in the status of the Soviet farms. The *Sovkhoz*y were now put on a basis of parity with other industrial enterprises. Also grouped into "trusts" and "syndicates," they were expected to manage their own finances and to show a profit. They were, however, put under the control of the Commissariat of Agriculture which could facilitate their leasing to various institutions or even private persons, who also would be obligated to remit a tax in kind.

In addition, there would be a tightening up of the "food policy" and the rationing system. Lenin concluded that there had been more "equalization" of food distribution than there should have been. Many "non-contributing" people had been fed, chiefly bureaucrats which War Communism had spawned. Now, food would be used as a "political instrument for restoring our industry." It would be viewed as "a means of increasing output" and distributed on the "condition that the productivity of labour is increased to the utmost" (32, "Speech Delivered at 3rd All-Russia Food Conference," 448-49). The policy would be to weed out all parasites and "Feed *only* good workers" (32, "Ideas About a State Economic Plan," 498). The urban proletariat would now be put into a position where they could repay their rural brothers:

**Wage increases and improvement in the conditions of industrial workers should be directly determined by the degree to which success is achieved...in supplying the peasantry with large quantities of the goods that are needed to raise the level of agriculture**

**and improve the[ir] living conditions** (33, "9th All-Russia Congress of Soviets," 178).

### **Land Tenure**

The Civil War had halted further land distribution, reduced peasant incentive, and created much anxiety about retaining the land originally acquired. The NEP granted the peasant the two things on which he set the highest value: freedom to choose the form in which his land should be cultivated and security of tenure. In May, 1921 a Land Law which conformed to the conditions of the NEP was issued -- "The Fundamental Law on the Exploitation of Land by the Workers." This was incorporated into the new Agricultural Code later that year. The Code declared that the "exploitation of the land" was the right of "all citizens, without distinction of sex, creed or nationality, desirous of working it with their own labour." It recognized no rights in "perpetuity", i.e. hereditary rights; however, the use of the land was of "indefinite duration," and it gave the peasants the right to engage in any form of land tenure they wished. However, it did restrict the conditions under which peasants had the right to withdraw from the communes in the concern to prevent excessive land fragmentation. This had always been a controversial point, and some Party members wanted to prevent withdrawal entirely.

Leasing and hiring had always gone on surreptitiously. Now both were legalized to conform to the new limited capitalism, albeit with certain conditions attached. Peasants were now allowed to lease land from each other and from the State. Since the land was nationalized, of course, there was still no buying or selling permitted. Lenin admitted that it was a peculiar situation which allowed the renting out of land when there was only *de facto* ownership, for the peasants were, in turn, leasing it from the "single land fund" (i.e., the State), but he argued that this was logical in the unique situation of a proletarian state-controlled capitalism. Out-leasing was permitted for households which had been "temporarily weakened" by natural disasters or loss of labour power for a period of two rotations (6 years). Any farmer who could afford it could in-lease land. Hiring was permitted if the farmer also worked "on an equal footing with the hired workers."

The principle of collectivization was not forgotten. In an early defence of the NEP, Lenin had reaffirmed that the future development of agriculture depended on the prospect that

**the least profitable, most backward, small and scattered peasant farms should gradu-**

**ally amalgamate and organize large-scale agriculture in common...That is how socialists have always imagined all this** (Carr, II, 289).

The NEP would hopefully sift out the unproductive farms and revive industrial production enough to assist large-scale agriculture. But the new Agricultural Code said nothing specific about large-scale farming (See Carr, II, 296-97).

So, in effect, the peasants were to consider themselves capitalist proprietors in almost a normal sense. The bargain was: "It is your job as a proprietor to produce, and the state will take a minimum tax" (32, "10th Congress," 227). As in all capitalist societies, they would owe the government a "tax" -- without compensation -- except that their "tax" was to be paid in food products. [Evidently, this "tax" was also considered as "rent."] It was emphasized that the Code was a transitional code for a transitional period. Just as the policy of private and foreign leasing in industry was a "step backward" in order to achieve "steps forward," so too was the agricultural program viewed. This Code remained in effect, unaltered, until Stalin began his forced collectivization program.

### **The Theory Behind NEP**

**"We must display extreme caution so as to preserve our workers' government and to retain our small and very small peasantry under its leadership and authority." (18)**

The NEP was both an economic and a political policy. It was, Lenin affirmed, the only possible policy in a condition of a transition to peace taking place in a period of economic crisis. It was the only possible policy to create a correct relationship between the peasantry and the proletariat; and "as long as there is no revolution in other countries, only agreement with the peasantry can save the socialist revolution in Russia" (32, "10th Congress of the R.C.P.(B.)," 215).

Lenin did not shirk examination of the past. While he maintained that the policy of War Communism "was in the main a correct one" in the situation of a "besieged fortress" (234), he conceded that

**We are very much to blame for having gone too far; we overdid the nationalisation of industry and trade, clamping down on local**



**exchange of commodities. Was that a mistake? It certainly was...it is an unquestionable fact that we went further than was theoretically and politically necessary....** (32, "10th Congress of the R.C.P.(B.)," 219-20).

Lenin admitted that the Bolsheviks had been "dreamers," but he insisted that that had not been a bad thing for it had enabled them to establish the first proletarian government and to make the first steps toward socialism in the history of the world. But "dreaming" had been a bad thing in the economic field:

**The principal mistake we have all been making up to now is too much optimism; as a result, we succumbed to bureaucratic utopias. Only a very small part of our plans has been realised. Life, everyone, in fact, has laughed at our plans** (32, "Ideas About a State Economic Plan," 497).

Carried away by revolutionary enthusiasm and political and military successes, the Bolsheviks had been overoptimistic about many matters. They had believed that socialism could be built quickly. They had relied on a European (specifically German) Revolution which was not taking shape. They had promoted large-scale agriculture when material conditions could not support it. Possibly they had attached too much political significance to the Poor Peasants Committees. There was no doubt that they had over-estimated peasant consciousness. They had come to the hard conclusions that the peasantry and the workers did not have the same interests, and that "these relations are not what we had believed them to be" (32, "10th Congress," 179). They had also failed to project the future states of agriculture, fuel and transportation. In general, they had yielded to the temptation to turn the peculiar necessities of War Communism into a theory of how to get from capitalism to communism, as Lenin conceded:

**We...presumed without having given it adequate consideration -- to be able to organise the state production and the state distribution of products on communist lines in a small-peasant country directly as ordered by the proletarian state. Experience has proved that we were wrong. It appears that a number of transitional stages were necessary -- state capitalism and socialism -- in order to prepare...for the transition to com-**

**munist** (33, "4th Anniversary of the October Revolution," 58).

Wartime economic policy had to be "clearly regarded as a mistake" for it had hindered the growth of the productive forces. But at the same time, it had been "the only possible tactics" (33, "7th Moscow Gubernia Conference of the R.C.P.(B.)," 86). Still, the Bolsheviks had to admit defeat on the economic front. They had over-run themselves, and now they needed to retreat to gain an "economic breathing space." Lenin believed that they had gone so far in a revolutionary direction that they could afford to do this. So like Brest-Litovsk, the NEP was a calculated retreat, not a policy of expediency or an acknowledgement of ultimate defeat, as their enemies gloated. It could not be denied that the NEP was a "reformist" and not a revolutionary policy. However, Lenin justified this by referring to Marx's theory of the relationship between reforms and revolution -- reforms being the byproducts of the class struggle of the proletariat. While Marx was talking about conditions before the "first to any extent permanent and lasting victory of the proletariat, if only in one country," Lenin reasoned that, while on an international scale reforms can still be considered a "byproduct,"

**they are, in addition, for the country in which victory has been achieved, a necessary and legitimate breathing space when, after the utmost exertion of effort, it becomes obvious that sufficient strength is lacking for the revolutionary accomplishment of some transition or another** (33, "The Importance of Gold," 115-16).

The nation was still fighting a war -- a war against capital. Since "direct assault" had failed, a different tactic was required: a "siege." Now that the State had to become a "wholesale merchant," it would be a "life and death" battle between the State capitalists and the private capitalists for the peasants' trade -- and the peasants' loyalty.

Lenin considered that the "basis for proper relations between the proletariat and the peasantry" had been created during the 1917-21 period which had caused the two classes to "form, sign and seal a military alliance to defend the Soviet power" (32, "3rd Congress of CI," 456). Politically, that had been correct during the unique period of revolution and war. Economically, it had created an abnormal situation:

**Our economic alliance with the peasants was...very simple, and even crude. The peasant obtained from us all the land and support against the big landowners. In return for this, we were to obtain food (32, "3rd Congress of CI," 486-87).**

That had seemed like sound theory at the time, but the peasants did not see it this way! The concept of "lending" food to their "brother" workers until some far-off time when industry could compensate them was stretching the limits of peasant consciousness beyond reality. It had been pretty much the utopian "dreaming" of the communists. Now the unity between the peasantry and the proletariat was ruptured both politically and economically. It had to be squarely faced that:

**It was the war and the ruin that forced us into War Communism. It was not, and could not be, a policy that corresponded to the economic tasks of the proletariat. It was a makeshift. The correct policy of the proletariat exercising its dictatorship in a small-peasant country is to obtain grain in exchange for the manufactured goods the peasant needs (32, "The Tax in Kind," 343).**

The tax in kind would signify "a transition from the requisition of all the peasants' surplus grain to regular socialist exchange of products between industry and agriculture":

**The alliance between the small peasants and the proletariat can become a correct and stable one from the socialist standpoint only when the complete restoration of transport and large-scale industry enables the proletariat to give the peasants, in exchange for food, all the goods they need for their own use and for the improvement of their farms (32, "3rd Congress of the CI," 457).**

Theory had returned to Marxist first principles: "The only possible economic foundation of socialism is large-scale machine industry. Whoever forgets this is no Communist" (32, "3rd Congress of the CI," 492). However, with industry in ruins and the proletariat diminished, declassed and starving, the ultimate goal of the NEP must be to get heavy industry up and running and thereby strengthen the numbers and position of the proletariat. How was this to happen? "We must start with the

peasantry." Only the peasant could give the worker the food and fuel needed to restart industry. However, it was realized that very large reserves of food and fuel were necessary for this to happen so, in the meantime, small local industry had to be the emphasis. While, the ideal relationship between the proletariat and the peasantry would be the exchange of farm products for State-controlled manufactured products, this was not yet possible -- although it still would be possible with assistance from world-wide capitalist industry. In the meantime, the only other economic relation possible between industry and agriculture was commercial trade, which was seen as progressive:

**Wholesale trade economically unites millions of small peasants: it gives them a personal incentive, links them up and leads them to the next step, namely, to various forms of association and alliance in the process of production itself (33, "4th Anniversary of the October Revolution," 59).**

### **The Famine**

The NEP did not come in time to save the country from the horrors of the worst famine experienced since 1891-2. While, the famine had been intensifying for many years, its crisis was impelled, not only from agricultural dislocation and fall in production, but from a terrible drought and two disastrous harvests in 1920 and 21. Only half the anticipated grain was collected the first year of the NEP, and twenty-seven million people were considered to be at risk of dying. The horrors of the famine have been well documented: the roadside littered with dead and dying bodies, the almost total disappearance of livestock, untold thousands of homeless and delinquent children roaming the cities, the incidences of cannibalism, etc. This situation compelled the government to institute some crisis measures. A million and a quarter peasants migrated or were evacuated to the Ukraine and Siberia. Peasants suffering from crop disasters were totally exempted from the tax in kind. Agricultural exhibitions were held in which medals, monetary rewards, and equipment (especially the coveted tractors) were awarded to super-producing districts. Reluctantly, the Bolsheviks were forced to appoint a non-party All-Russian Committee for Aid to the Hungry, chaired by Gorky, to solicit famine relief from the imperialist countries. Several countries, as well as individuals, donated foodstuffs, seed, and tractors. A chief agreement was made with Hoover's American Relief Administration (ARA). (19)

A year later, a turn-around point had been reached, and the famine was under control. The tax in kind was then reduced to a standard 10% of production, and peasants were given the option to pay part of their tax in money. A prohibition was enforced against the seizure of livestock as a penalty for non-payment, and a good harvest was expected.

### Criticisms of the NEP

**Gorky: "The immense peasant tide will end by engulfing everything...The peasant will become master of Russia, since he represents numbers. And it will be terrible for our future." (20)**

On the one hand, the NEP was viewed gleefully by the Mensheviks, SRs and emigre White Guard who hopefully spread the rumors that the Bolsheviks had "come to their senses" and returned to the capitalism of a bourgeois democratic revolution. A more sophisticated theory proposed that the NEP was the natural "evolution" of Bolshevism. These groups now went so far as to offer to become "partners" with the Bolsheviks: instead, Lenin offered them the "firing squad"! On the other hand, the NEP continued to come under attack by Party members, such as the former WO people who charged that the leadership had "lost faith in the working class." There was a small ultra-left Party element (Preobrazhensky, *et al.*) who clung to the utopianism of War Communism. They were terrified of *kulak* resurgence and wanted to force the peasants into collectivization, or even bring in foreign capital and workers to create "great agricultural factories." These ideas were summarily rejected, but the quote by Gorky above represented the thinking of many who regarded the putting of the peasants in the forefront as a "renunciation" of the dictatorship of the proletariat. They feared the growth of small capitalism, for the Party had always regarded petty-bourgeoisism as a greater threat than white guardism or foreign interference. Lenin reassured them:

**We must not be afraid of the growth of the petty bourgeoisie and small capital. What we must fear is protracted starvation, want and food shortage, which create the danger that the proletariat will be utterly exhausted and will give way to petty-bourgeois vacillation, and despair. This is a much more terrible prospect (32, "10th Congress," 237-38).**

That is, the problem was not the petty-bourgeoisism of the rural petty-bourgeoisie -- for that was their inevitable class nature -- but the deterioration of the consciousness of the proletariat. And it was not petty capitalism *per se* that was the danger, but that "the enemy in our midst is anarchic capitalism and anarchic commodity exchange" (33, "2nd Congress of Political Education Departments," 67).

There were, however, two major concerns. First was the "rehabilitation" of the *kulak*, which would widen the gulf between the poor and rich peasants (by the end of the war, this had pretty much leveled off) and renew exploitation of the poor peasant. Lenin was fully aware of this:

**We must not shut our eyes to the fact that the replacement of requisitioning by the tax means that the *kulak* element under this system will grow far more than hitherto. It will grow in places where it could not grow before (Carr, II, 291).**

Yet this was the price that had to be paid, for it was the natural course of capitalism. It was possible that, later on down the road, there might have to be a second "Peasants' October," but first people had to be fed, and *kulak* farms yielded the highest grain production. It was believed that the *kulaks* could be controlled.

The second area of concern was the proper relation between the peasants and the proletariat which Lenin had been confident the NEP would restore. But it seemed to many that the concessions made to the peasants were at the expense of the workers. No longer did they have a guaranteed ration, the price of bread was still often exorbitant, and the hazards of unemployment increased. The former WOs continued to accuse that the purpose of NEP was to provide "a cheaper government for the peasant" at the expense of the workers and that the "peasant had become the spoilt child of the proletarian dictatorship" (Carr, II, 294-95). At this time, the balance of trade was definitely in favor of agriculture, and prices favored the peasantry. Agricultural prices increasingly came into conflict with industrial prices, as was later to come to a head with the "scissors crisis." (21)

The peasants of all levels did seem all too satisfied with the new arrangements. When goods finally began to flow between city and countryside, most goods -- and profits -- ended up in *kulak* and would-be *kulak* pockets. But even though the *kulaks* obviously prospered most and grew in number, the middle and even the poor peasants' lot also improved. They showed little inclination to either

control the *kulaks* or collectivize agriculture.

### Lenin's Assessment of the NEP

**“Cast off the tinsel, the festive communist garments, learn a simple thing simply, and we shall beat the private capitalist.” (22)**

At the 11th and last Congress that he attended (Mar-Apr, 1922), Lenin gave an assessment of the first year of the NEP. The political establishment of the proletariat had been the first part of the victory of the Revolution; the NEP was the “second part of the victory, i.e., to build communism with the hands of non-Communists...establish a link with the peasantry” (33, “11th Congress of the R.C.P.(B.),” 291). His conclusions were mixed. As far as economic progress went, the gains were very little. The first year of the NEP had been most important as a learning experience. He divided this into three “lessons.”

First, the NEP was important primarily as a means of testing whether there was a link between the new socialist economy they were trying to create, as represented by the State factories and farms, and the peasant economy. His answer was, “Not yet.” Currently, the peasant was “allowing us credit,” but

**We must prove that we can help him and that in this period, when the small peasant is in a state of appalling ruin, impoverishment and starvation, the Communists are really helping him. Either we prove that, or he will send us to the devil (33, “11th Congress,” 270).**

The second lesson was to test, through competition between State and private capitalist enterprises, the ability to supply the peasants with their needs. Again, Lenin's conclusion was negative: “This has been proved in the past year. We cannot run the economy” (33, “11th Congress,” 273). He voiced the peasants' viewpoint:

**But the capitalists were, after all, able to supply things -- are you? You are not able to do it...As people you are splendid, but you cannot cope with the economic task you have undertaken...Your principles are communist, your ideals are splendid; they are written out so beautifully that you seem to be saints, that you should go to heaven while you are still alive. But can you get things done? (33, “11th Congress,” 272-73).**

Quite simply, in order to “get things done,” the revolutionaries must face up to the fact that they lacked the business know-how of the bourgeoisie. They must put away their “communist conceit” and “communist fibbing” and learn how to trade with efficiency and “reason” from the ordinary capitalist salesman.

The third lesson was that the NEP would test whether state capitalism under proletarian rule could work as a transition to socialism. Since “state capitalism is capitalism that we must confine within certain bounds,” had they done that? Again, Lenin's answer was “No.” So far, the car was not obeying the hand of the driver. The Bolsheviks might be “splendid revolutionaries,” but they were wretchedly inept administrators. Not only must they learn from the bourgeois, they must learn how to compel the bourgeoisie to work for them. They must “put the right man in the right job” and get down to studying and practical work.

Yet, Lenin was hopeful. He said that the time had come “to call a halt to the retreat.” This had a double meaning. First, he meant that they would not have to regress into an expanded sphere of capitalism or further concessions to the peasantry. They had set their parameters and knew what must be done. Second, he meant: stop the panic and depression, stop the philosophizing and arguing about the NEP as a “retreat.” The new attitude must be to look at the NEP as a “regrouping of forces,” a new “tactic” or perhaps “strategy” to get to socialism. And this “tactic” involved the very pragmatic measures of strict national accounting and control, gathering and assessing data from local sources, etc.

However, Lenin foresaw the success of the NEP only if three future conditions would be met: that there be no more outside intervention; that the approaching financial crisis not be too severe; and that they make no serious political mistakes.

While Lenin had been scolding the Communists in his address to the Congress, six months later in his speech to the 4th Congress of the CI, he emphasized the positive “dividends” of the NEP, modest as progress might be. Given that the first five years of the regime had been spent in a state of war, he maintained there was sufficient proof that “as a state, we are able to trade, to maintain our strong positions in agriculture and industry, and to make progress” (33, “4th Congress of the CI,” 427). First, peasant uprisings had all but ceased. It appeared that “the peasants are satisfied with their present position...We have no reason to fear any movement against us from that quarter” (424). Despite complaints about the State machinery, the peasants had weathered the famine and paid their tax with almost no coercion. Agricultural output

had now reached 75% of pre-WWI figures (Carr, *Interregnum*, 16). Worker groups in some countries, namely the USA and Canada, were donating agricultural experts, tractors and teams to organize large-scale model farms. The Bolsheviks gratefully accepted this aid since they did not have the resources to aid the *Sovkhozy* and *kolkhozy*.

There had been a revival of industry although overall output was still only about 25% of pre-WWI level (16). Still, more consumer goods were being provided to the peasantry. Also, conditions of the workers in the major cities were slightly improving; at least there were no serious signs of discontent. However, the increase lay mainly in light manufacture, and the small peasant factories in the countryside were actually doing better than the urban factories. Electrification was progressing slowly but satisfactorily.

The situation in heavy industry (production of the material means of production) was still grave, since as yet the SU had not been able to get the necessary financial backing to revive it. They had received no foreign loans or concession offers, although both were being negotiated. Only a handful of joint or mixed companies had been established with native and foreign capitalists, and only a few of the smaller factories had been leased out. While surpluses were slowly building up, as yet the State could not subsidize heavy industry as export trade was still very low.

### The "Nepman"

While Lenin insisted that they must look to the bourgeois merchants to learn how to trade, the NEP created a new problematic figure on the Soviet scene. The bagman of the old black market days had been extinguished, but in his place had arisen the Nepman, who was an inevitable consequence of the Bolsheviks' new policy. First, there were the shop owners and petty street traders and hustlers of the bazaars and markets. Second, there were the new middlemen who functioned as the State's "merchants" through the co-op system. Recruited from the old merchant class and the black market dealers, inevitably the Nepmen began to accrue large profits out of commissions, as well as speculation, skimming and other illegal deals. Carr points out that the fact that some Nepmen used the co-ops as facades for private trading concerns marked the first "infiltration of private capital into state trading organs and...their mutual interpenetration" (II, 342). While on their way to forming a *nouveau riche* strata, Lenin foresaw no danger that the Nepmen would pose a political threat to the regime, for

they controlled no means of production and, furthermore, were only interested in making a quick profit. Measures were passed to tax these merchants, as well as professionals, intellectuals, etc., thus compelling them to subsidize heavy industry.

### The Cooperatives

**"The system of civilised co-operators is the system of socialism." (23)**

Wrestling with all the problems and variables outlined above, and knowing that his death was imminent, Lenin took (perhaps too) full responsibility for all the mistakes that had been made and the intentions that had gone astray. He spent his last months working out a concrete plan of action to bequeath to his successors so that "NEP Russia will become socialist Russia" (33, "Speech at Plenary Session of Moscow Soviet," 443). In the system of cooperatives, Lenin saw the means that were the "*simplest, easiest and most acceptable to the peasant*" (33, "On Co-operation," 468). The cooperative movement had always figured prominently in the Bolsheviks' scheme of things, but had assumed a different role and importance during each period. Also, the terminology employed is a bit confusing, so that it is useful to trace the development of the co-op idea.

### The Cooperatives: Pre-Revolution

At the time of the October Revolution, there had been a system of cooperatives in place for some time, although it was not nearly as extensive as in Europe. Foremost were the urban consumers' (buying) co-ops -- not too different from the hippy/yuppy co-ops in our own country. These were of two types: bourgeois and worker co-ops. There were also credit co-ops, similar to employee savings and loan organizations, *artels* (selling) co-ops which marketed workers' handicrafts, and unemployed workers' associations which "marketed" workers' labor skills. In the countryside, the most prominent form of co-op was the marketing *artel*, where farmers united to sell their grain, farm produce, dairy products, and handicrafts. The rural co-ops, which could function out of the commune (*mir*) or not, were of an "all-peasant" nature.

At this time, the Bolsheviks were mainly concerned with the urban consumer co-ops. They had always advocated support for and encouraged their members to participate in them, for they recognized an apparatus that could be progressively useful in the present and transformed into a socialist feature in the future. The Russian

SDs had submitted a draft resolution to the CI on the co-ops in 1910. It warned that the worker co-ops were also under bourgeois influence, dominated by Mensheviks and SRs. However, the co-ops were progressive in that they represented consolidation of the workers, bettered their conditions, lent assistance to their struggles, and gave them training for the future organization of socialism. Moreover, the co-ops could be important centers of SD socialist propaganda and organizing. Given that the peasantry was still mired in semi-feudalism and that rural co-ops were dominated by the *kulaks*, these were not given much attention. There was very little progressive about them, other than that they represented the age-old peasant trait of mutual aid and were another marker of rural transition to capitalism. True producers' co-ops seemed so far off in the future that the draft contained only one vaguely stated reference to them: they must be associated with consumers' co-ops in order to "contribute to the struggle of the working class" (16, "The Question of Co-operative Societies," 278-79).

Lenin conceded that "in a way consumers' societies do constitute a bit of socialism...[since] socialist society is one big consumers' society with production for consumption organised according to plan" (9, "The Latest in Iskra Tactics," 371). However, he warned the workers that under capitalism, there was "nothing socialist about them": "The future mode of production and distribution, which is being *prepared* now by the co-operative societies, can begin to function *only after* the expropriation of the capitalists" (16, "The Question...," 282). It was necessary to keep hammering this home because there were many illusions about the co-ops. The old utopianists, e.g. Owens, had projected fantastic dreams of a "socialism" built on cooperatives -- only without the overthrow of the capitalists and the establishment of proletarian political control. The more immediate danger to be combatted was the SR vision of "socialization" which envisioned "the development among the peasantry of all possible types of...economic cooperatives...for the gradual emancipation of the peasantry from the sway of money capital...and for the preparation of collective agricultural production of the future" (6, "Revolutionary Adventurism," 202).

### After the Revolution

After the October Revolution, the co-ops assumed an entirely different perspective. As Lenin put it,

**Here quantity passes into the quality. The co-operative, as a small island in capitalist society is a little shop. The co-operative, if**

**it embraces the whole of society, in which the land is socialised and the factories nationalised, is socialism** (27, "Version of the Article 'The Immediate Tasks'," 215-16).

At this time, the Bolsheviks believed that this "capitalist legacy" could quite easily facilitate the transition to mass accounting and control of the distribution of goods. They planned immediately to organize all the co-ops into a single "nation-wide socialist co-operative" under the leadership of the workers' co-ops. This meant making the co-ops State organs like the banks and factories. The plan would give the proletariat a sense of power and control and concretely involve them in creating their new society. It was consistent with the idea of "abolishing classes" by subordinating the bourgeoisie to the proletariat. An early "Draft on Consumer's Communes" mandated all citizens to join a co-op, and proposed that a majority of "non-affluent classes" must dominate each individual co-op (26, "Draft Decree on Consumers' Communes," 416-17). Some credit co-ops were merged with the national bank, and some workers' co-ops were also actually nationalized. The co-ops were instructed to "compete" with the soviets to expropriate the goods of the rich and distribute them to the poor.

However, the Bolsheviks soon found they had to back down, for their vision was too radical and lacked a material basis. Because of violent bourgeois opposition, they had to concede several measures. In the "Decree on Consumers' Co-operatives" of April, 1918, the idea of the "single co-op" was omitted; the bourgeois and workers' co-ops would remain separate. This meant they had to abandon their plan to expel the bourgeois from the co-op boards, although they succeeded in expelling the biggest capitalists. They also had to give up the "proletarian principle" of no-entrance fees.

The problem was that the soviets were still too weak to organize a massive reconstruction of the cooperatives. Not only that, but they were too weak to even organize food distribution. So the co-ops, which had much more experience in "running shops," were essential to do this. Lenin concluded that while progress through this change of tactics would be slower, in the end it would be more sure. He challenged the soviets to measure their success in "socialist construction" by how well they could organize urban co-ops and "to what extent their development has reached the point of embracing the whole population" (27, "The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government," 255-56). To the workers' co-ops, the Bolsheviks continued to propagandize the socialist ideal: The "*most vital* problem of the day" involved "measures of *transition from* the

bourgeois co-operatives to a communist consumers' and producers' union of the whole population" (28, "Measures Governing the Transition from Bourgeois Co-operative to Proletarian-Communist Supply and Distribution," 443).

### Under War Communism

At the outset of White Guard rebellion, many bourgeois and *kulak* co-ops were shut down for "serving the ends" of enemy propaganda. Lenin described this as a "wave of persecution" quite naturally brought on by the conditions of the time. However, when foreign intervention began, Lenin demanded that these be reopened and also that all co-ops be denationalized. His reasoning was that, despite the petty-bourgeois democrats' opposition to Bolshevism, the co-ops would back the regime in the face of outside invasion. They had given indication that they had abandoned "hostility" for "neutrality." Lenin made an analogy to the use of bourgeois specialists in that if the co-ops did their job and did not oppose the regime, they would be left alone. More attention was now given to the rural co-ops which were seen as centers of uniting the peasantry. The support of the co-ops -- and trade unions -- would give them a "moral victory" and form an "organised rear" (28, "Moscow Party Workers' Meeting," 224, 222).

As the Civil War decreased the influence of the urban bourgeoisie, and the Poor Peasant Committees took care of the *kulaks*, the difference between bourgeois and worker co-ops diminished, and most co-ops became a mixture of petty-bourgeois and proletarian/poor peasant elements. Lenin now began to talk about turning individual co-ops into "communes," with the ultimate goal of a "single consumers' commune" (29, "8th Congress," 177). "Co-op" was a bourgeois (capitalist) structure; "commune" was a proletarian (socialist) structure, so this meant that the co-ops must be proletarianized. That is, as opposed to co-ops, "communes" did not give advantages to a group of special shareholders, did not shut out the poor, did not give preference in distribution to the richer over the poor, only confiscated from the rich and middle peasants, and so forth (29, "Measures Governing the Transition from Bourgeois Co-operative to Proletarian-Communist Supply and Distribution," 443).

Some Party members wanted to disband the consumer co-ops, feeling that they "stank"; some wanted to nationalize them. Lenin insisted that the co-ops must not be tampered with at this time for their function of food distribution was absolutely essential to win the war. Similar to the process in the soviets, the communists must gradually win control over the co-ops, and it was made obligatory for all Party members to work in some kind of

co-op. Lenin's long-range plan at the time seems to have been that as individual co-ops became "communes," they would gradually be merged into larger and larger districts until, ultimately, a "single consumers' commune" was created.

As far as the producers' associations in the countryside were concerned, *Sovkhozy*, *kolkhozy* and *artels* were all considered forms of "cooperative farming," but the first two were proletarian (socialist) structures while the *artel* was a bourgeois (capitalist) form, i.e., a co-op. All were still *kulak*-dominated, if not in actuality, then in consciousness. So there was not much propaganda to turn the rural *artels* into "communes" and, in addition, there were no means to technologically assist them.

As the Civil War intensified, however, it became necessary to submit the co-ops to centralized planning -- as was all else. Credit and consumer co-ops were amalgamated and their administrative organs subordinated under the Commissariat of Food. At the 9th Congress, Lenin summed up what the general attitude must be: "Link up the producers' co-operatives with the consumers' co-operatives and agree to any concession that may increase the amount of products" (30, "9th Congress," 482). Coordination or "unification" of the co-ops was essential, but actual nationalization was premature (just how would they nationalize a million *kulaks*? Lenin asked). The rural poor must first win a majority against the *kulaks*, and the communists must help them create proletarian organs by intensified participation, propaganda and agitation: "Create a basis, and then -- then we shall see" (484). For the remainder of the War, there was almost no further Party discussion of the co-ops. As might be expected, the Kronstadters had demanded emancipation of the co-ops from the central government with complete autonomy of trade.

### Under the NEP

As attention turned to economic rehabilitation, the role of the co-ops was reassessed. As was every other structure in the aftermath of the War, the co-ops were in an extreme state of decline. Under the new conditions of the NEP, it was more important than ever that they be preserved, now as vehicles of local economic exchange. No new decrees on co-ops were issued because, as Lenin stated, they had perfectly good pre-war legislation which merely needed to be dusted off. The 10th Congress (Mar. 1921) merely instructed the CC to

**develop the structure and activity of the co-operatives in conformity with the Programme**

**of the R.C.P. and with a view to substituting the tax in kind for the surplus-grain appropriation system** (32, "10th Congress," 221).

This was deliberately vague because no one knew how the first year of the NEP would progress. However, it was clear that the subordination of the co-ops to the Commissariat for Food had to be rescinded and their "freedom and rights" extended to conform to the new conditions of a limited market capitalism.

As the NEP was worked out, a new theory of the co-ops evolved. They too were to be regarded as one of the forms of state capitalism, similar to the concessions, although far more complicated. Lenin called the co-ops "cooperative" capitalist trade under the Soviet system" (32, "The Tax in Kind," 347). The system would "facilitate accounting, control, supervision and the establishment of contractual relations between the state...and the capitalist" (348). It was superior to private trade in that it "facilitates the association and organisation of millions of people... and...is an enormous gain from the standpoint of the subsequent transition from state capitalism to socialism" (348). The co-ops were still "shops," but now under state capitalism, they were seen as a vital instrument to combat anarchic commodity exchange. They would be accountable to the State but there would be "no restrictions on regular free market operations," and they were to be given "broad opportunities for procurement and all-round development of local industry and revival of economic life in general." They were even given full autonomy to lease government enterprises. (32, "10th All-Russia Conference of R.C.P.(B.)," 434). Moreover, certain of the more "proletarian" consumers co-ops also would function as instruments of the "food dictatorship." They would contract to do the State's business and, thus, as direct ancillaries of state capitalism, would compete with private capitalism for the peasants' after-tax trade:

**All goods are delivered to the co-operative societies, so that the co-operators may trade on...behalf of the centralised state, the big factories, and the proletariat -- but not on their own behalf** (32, "10th All-Russia Conference of the R.C.P.(B.)," 421).

Later, these co-ops handled only the State's wholesale trade, State retail trade being transferred to State shops and department stores, e.g., GUM.

### **"On Co-operation"**

Lenin's article "On Co-operation" (1923), written shortly before his death, represents his final statement on the agricultural problem. In a sense, it was a return to the original Party Programme in which the Bolsheviks envisioned an expansion of the co-ops to include the whole population, their "proletarianization," and their gradual merger into "one single co-op." But it was also theoretically adapted to the new problem: the means of transition from the NEP to socialism.

In his article, Lenin more fully explained the role of the co-ops under state capitalism. The co-ops stood halfway between capitalism and socialism, but were weighted in the socialist direction. They were a "third type of enterprise" of the new regime. They stood between the state capitalist farms and industries and the private capitalist enterprises. They differed from state capitalist enterprises in two ways: they were private and they were collective. But they did not differ from socialist enterprises because the land and the means of production belonged to the State, i.e., the working class. So that put them in the progressive position of setting the economic basis on which socialism could grow:

**The power of the state over all large-scale means of production, political power in the hands of the proletariat, the alliance of this proletariat with the many millions of small and very small peasants, the assured proletarian leadership of the peasantry, etc. -- is this not all that is necessary to build a complete socialist society...out of co-operatives alone...It is still not the building of socialist society, but it is all that is necessary and sufficient for it** (468).

In hindsight, Lenin had said that if the peasantry had originally been organized into co-operative societies, "we would by now have been standing with both feet on the soil of socialism" (474). But it had been large-scale agriculture that had been the original concept of collectivization, and that had not been possible to achieve. Now it was realized that large-scale agriculture could only be built upon the basis of the cooperative system, or the *artel*. Under the present conditions of the NEP, the *artel* was far more acceptable to the peasantry, as it was individual as well as collective.

Lenin advocated that material help, loans, equipment, etc. granted by the State must be weighted in favor of all forms of cooperative enterprises which had a large membership. In addition, incentives and bonuses should be granted to individual cooperators. "A social system



emerges only if it has the financial backing of a definite class," i.e., the proletarian government (469).

### The "Cultural" Revolution

**"The economic power in the hands of the proletarian state of Russia is quite adequate to ensure the transition to communism. What then is lacking: Obviously, what is lacking is culture...." (24)**

In his article, Lenin asserted that there had been a "radical modification in our whole outlook on socialism" (33, "On Co-operation," 474). That is, the emphasis had shifted from the "political revolution," which had been accomplished, to the "cultural revolution." Lenin was using the term "culture" in its broad sense as "civilization," not, of course, in its narrow sense of "the arts." First, he meant that, given the fact that the peasants had been granted a new status as entrepreneurs and merchants, they must be educated as "cultured traders" in the European, not the Asiatic, sense. The basis of "cultured trading" was the co-op system. The co-op movement, in turn, was a rectification of the problem that, due to circumstances, the Bolsheviks had had to start from the "opposite end" of orthodox theory in that the political and social revolution had preceded the cultural revolution. Just as industry and agriculture were inseparable, so too were culture and economics. "Cultured trading" would advance the economic basis, yet a certain development of the material means of production was necessary for the cultural revolution to succeed.

Therefore, in order for the co-op plan to work, the general level of "culture" in the peasantry first must be increased. By this, Lenin meant that a nationwide campaign for universal literacy must be advanced, for most of the country was in a state of "semi-savagery." The peasant could never understand political concepts until he had learned to read and write. Lenin warned that this "cultural revolution" would not be nearly as easy as the "political revolution" which was achieved by force. The peasants had an extraordinarily low level of education and political awareness, and their sensibilities must be handled with kid gloves. Lenin advised against direct "communist" propaganda in the rural areas at this time and against a direct assault on religion.

Moreover, Lenin also meant that if the State intended to compete with private capitalism, the Communists must humble themselves to learn the "culture" of capitalist trading from the bourgeois and foreign merchants. They must stop relying on their revolutionary laurels, desist

moaning that "we didn't learn to trade in prison," and face the fact that they lacked the common sense, reason and initiative to compete with the capitalist traders. Lenin gave a humorous example of shipfuls of imported tinned meat rotting in the harbor because the Communists, out of "inefficiency and slovenliness," couldn't muster up enough common sense to get it to shore. Instead, they ran around in circles trying to figure out a proper "chain of command." This fiasco smacked of Russia's legacy of "Asiatic" trading, which was characterized by an impossible maze of bureaucracy, red tape and bribery in order to get things done.

In addition, Lenin developed two other important plans to ensure the success of the NEP. These were aimed at controlling petty-bourgeois and anarchist elements and at reducing the bureaucratic "ulcer" which had mushroomed during the Civil War. First, was the purging of the Party. The previous uprisings had brought home the fact that the Party had lost touch with the masses. Basically, as he stated, "Our Party is not proletarian enough" (33, "Conditions for Admitting New Members to the Party," 256). Since it was the chiefly the Mensheviks who were spreading the hopeful fiction that the proletarian revolution had failed and that conditions were returning to the (capitalist) status of the democratic revolution, his recommendation was to seriously purge the Party of "those who have lost touch with the masses... of rascals, of bureaucratic, dishonest or wavering Communists, and of (99 out of every 100) Mensheviks who have repainted their 'facade' but who have remained Mensheviks at heart" (33, "Purging the Party," 39, 41). This was to be accomplished with the help of the working masses, including the peasantry: "We must have non-Party people controlling the Communists" (32, "Instructions of the Council of Labour and Defence," 388). In addition, proletarian requirements were to be more stringent and probation periods longer for Party candidates. Eventually, about 25% of the Party was purged.

The Civil War had unavoidably skewed the nature of both the Party and the Soviet government by entangling them. Lenin felt strongly that "Party machinery must be separated from the Soviet government machinery" (33, "11th Congress," 314). What had happened was that the Party had, out of necessity, usurped many of the functions of the Commissariats, which were now in a wretchedly weakened state and bloated with incompetent administrators. (The first attempt to eliminate these parasites had actually increased their number, due to having appointed new administrators to conduct the process!) The "Asiatic" influence had to be purged from government as well as from commerce. A campaign must be waged against

the all-pervasive bribery and red tape; on the other hand, bonuses would be granted to “good bureaucrats” for “speedily increasing output and expanding both home and foreign trade” (33, “Draft Directive of the Political Bureau on the NEP,” 198).

Lenin’s other major recommendation also came out of the struggle against bourgeois bureaucratism, in both State and Party. His plan was to reorganize the Commissariat of Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspection (WPI) and the Central Control Commission (CCC). The WPI was originally intended to serve as a “watchdog” over all other State institutions. It had been neglected during the Civil War, and many Party members wanted it disbanded (including Trotsky). Instead, Lenin recommended that it be strengthened and that its membership be reduced, but candidates carefully screened as dedicated Communists and communist supporters. In addition, its purpose should be expanded from merely “detecting and exposing” abuses to providing solutions “to improve things,” including assisting in the strict accounting which was essential to control the limited capitalism (33, “Tasks of the WPI,” 42). This would put more real power into the hands of the workers and peasants and enable them to become actively, politically engaged, as well as reduce the influence and numbers of the old bourgeois administrators: “Hundreds and thousands of working people should pass through the school of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspection and learn to administer the state” (31, “Speech at a General Meeting of Communists,” 435).

Shortly before his death, Lenin devised an even bolder plan. He recommended that the CCC and the WPI be amalgamated and, in fact, that the CCC be put under the control of the WPI. The CCC was the “watchdog” on Party organizations, but was itself a high Party body with authority to hear complaints against Party members, recommend censure and expulsion from the Party, etc. So not only would this plan still further empower the workers and peasants, but it also has to be viewed as an attempt to control corruption and deviation in the Party after his death. This plan was greeted negatively by many Party members, including both Trotsky and Stalin.

#### **Portent for the Future: Preobrazhensky, *et al***

**“We must not delude ourselves with lies...It is the main source of our bureaucracy.” (25)**

In March, 1922, the Political Bureau had charged Preobrazhensky, as one of the Party’s leading economists, with the task of composing theses on “The Organisation of the Russian Communist Party’s Work in

the Rural Districts Under Present Conditions.” Lenin was very displeased with Preobrazhensky’s approach. His criticisms are significant in light of the role Preobrazhensky was to play later in providing theoretical support for Stalin’s bureaucratic state capitalism under the guise of “socialism.”

Lenin accused Preobrazhensky’s theses of being “ultra- and super-academic; they smack of the intelligentsia, the study circle and the litterateur, and not of practical state and economic activity” (33, “To Molotov for Members of Political Bureau,” 238). Specifically, he objected to Preobrazhensky’s mindless idealization of all forms of cooperative farming -- particularly the *Sovkhozy* -- and his overestimation of the peasants’ enthusiasm. On the contrary, Lenin asserted, “There is no proof that the “collectives are, in general, better. We must not irritate the peasants with false communist self-adulation” (238).

Lenin accused Preobrazhensky of refusing to deal concretely with analysis and practical methods to improve cooperative farming, and of “foolish communistic playing at co-operation.” In essence, Preobrazhensky viewed the collectives as a “socialist” institutions. Lenin regarded his theses as mere “pious wishes” of how he wanted things to be, which “is typical of *contemporary* communist bureaucracy,” as was his propensity to give “instructions in the form of decrees” (239). “Bureaucracy is throttling us precisely because we are still playing with instructions in the form of decrees” (239).

An example of Preobrazhensky’s “pious wishes” was his glorification of the State farms. Because, like industry, they had been nationalized by the State, he regarded them as “socialist,” ignoring the fact that under the NEP, both industry and the *Sovkhozy* had been put on a self-financing and competitive basis. Lenin ridiculed his recommendation that “the staffs of the state farms must be purged of the petty proprietary elements.” He commented that the peasants would laugh at this, as if there were just a few petty bourgeoisie in control, instead of the farms being entirely petty-bourgeois in nature. It would be like “purging the peasants’ huts of bad air!” (240). Moreover, Preobrazhensky had called the State farm laborers “cadres of the agricultural proletariat.” Lenin called this not only “communist conceit” but a “lie.” Despite the fact that objectively they were hired workers, they had little if any “proletarian consciousness.” They were in fact “paupers’, petty bourgeois, or what you will.” Lenin’s point was that while a certain kind of structure could be called “socialist,” its actual composition and function in the larger economic context must be taken into account. The failure to recognize this led to the kinds of lies which were “the main source of our bureaucracy.”

Preobrazhensky's theses point ahead ominously to the future under Stalin. Ignoring reality, he was painting the picture he wished to see, and relying on bureaucratic means to will it into existence. In general, Lenin criticized him for his "scholastic, either-or," mechanistic approach, which rendered him unable to make a materialist analysis of the objective conditions of the transitional period. To Preobrazhensky, "State capitalism is capitalism...and that is the only way it can and should be interpreted" (33, "11th Congress," 310). That is, the State either had to be socialist or capitalist. So this rigidity ultimately led him to calling conditions "socialist" which were not, and played right into Stalin's hands.

Lenin also criticized other of Preobrazhensky's false steps. First, was his harsh treatment and alienation of petty-bourgeois intellectual elements whose "culture" and expertise were still desperately needed. Second, was his aim to set up a separate Economic Bureau. What this meant, in short, was an amalgamation of Party and State machinery, i.e., the Stalinist conception, and precisely what Lenin was struggling against. Lenin also objected to Preobrazhensky's devaluation of the Poor Peasants Committees, as if the class struggle in the countryside had been completed. Lenin warned that the PPCs might again be needed in the future (310-316). These matters also stem from Preobrazhensky's false premise that the USSR was already further along on a "socialist path" than it actually was. If it wasn't, then in his schematic thinking, it had to have reverted to the bourgeois stage of "capitalism" and that, of course, would be an intolerable invalidation of the Proletarian Revolution.

The future and damaging import of Preobrazhensky's methodology could not, of course, be recognized at this time and seemed to be merely indicative of the ultra-leftism of many Party members who were loath to let go of War Communism. Preobrazhensky had criticized Lenin for calling the economic policies of War Communism a "mistake," and he continually urged him to set a definite limit to the NEP period. Preobrazhensky's blindness seemed merely to reflect an overall flaw -- yet a potential danger -- in the Party: a sort of left-over "revolutionary glow" and a head-in-the-clouds addiction to theory. Preobrazhensky's mind was "restricted by what is customary and usual; he is a propagandist whose mind is taken up with measures directed to the purpose of propaganda" (314). That is, he was interpreting reality on the basis of the Party Program, the purpose of which was to propagandize the ultimate goals of the Bolsheviks. I believe that, in reality, Preobrazhensky's approach really masked the old Menshevik undialectic "two-stage revolution" theory, which would later be exposed in Trotsky and

Stalin.

Putting the kindest face on Preobrazhensky's mistakes, Lenin concluded that "The main defect in the Party's work in the rural districts is the failure to study practical experience. This is the root of all evil, and the root of bureaucracy" ("To Molotov," 241). Lenin jokingly consigned Preobrazhensky to a "long period" of work in the rural forestry union.

### Lenin's Prognosis

**"The idea of building communist society exclusively with the hands of the communists is...absolutely childish. We Communists are but a...drop in the ocean of the people...We shall be able to lead the people along the road we have chosen only if we correctly determine it not only from the standpoint of its direction in world history...We must also determine it correctly for our own native land." (26)**

So for the culturally backward and economically underdeveloped Soviet Union, this meant building communism with the help of bourgeois specialists and the peasantry. And it meant beginning on a foundation of small-scale peasant agriculture. In a letter to the French CP, Lenin had warned that "Marx did not regard concentration in agriculture as a simple and straightforward process," and that "the immediate application of *integral* communism to small-peasant farming would be a *profound error*" (33, "Theses on Agrarian Question Adopted by C.P. of France," 134-35). Since France was by far a more cultured and developed nation than the SU, what did this mean for "our own native land?" Lenin predicted that it would take a "whole historical epoch to get the entire population into the work of the cooperatives. At best we can achieve this in one or two decades" (33, "On Co-operation," 470). This seemed to imply that the Bolshevik form of proletarian state capitalism and the NEP, or controlled market trade, would continue until the system of cooperatives was in place. And this, in turn, implied that only after the system of *artels*/cooperatives had been built up, would the logical sequence be to progress to communes and to the Soviet "factory-farms," as heavy industry was revived to supply them and the peasants' consciousness had evolved to accept them.

Naturally enough, Lenin had been unspecific about how long the NEP would go on. He had, at different times, estimated "five years," then "ten years," "a whole epoch," "a long time but...not forever," "decades, genera-

tions-- but not centuries." Given optimum conditions, he had predicted that it would take 10-15 years to rehabilitate heavy industry. At his most specific, he had suggested that after about ten years of strict accounting and control, collection of statistics, etc., the NEP would be re-evaluated. He had not projected any more concrete plan of action.

Carr states that, at the time of Lenin's death, the co-ops accounted for 10%, the State directly for 6.6%, and private capitalism for 88.4% of all trade (*Interregnum*, 19-20). This brings up important questions about the policies of the period between Lenin and Stalin. Although there are many other economic and political factors to take into account, it is of particular interest what happened to the co-op plan -- considering that a mere five years after Lenin's death, Stalin began to brutally force the peasants into collectivization. ◇

#### Notes

- (1) Vol. 28, "Speech at Meeting of Poor Peasants Committees," pp. 177-78.
- (2) p. 175.
- (3) Vol. 27, "Fifth All-Russia Congress of Soviets," p. 525.
- (4) Carr considers that the Poor Peasants Committees mainly functioned as "informers" and that they represented an attempt to "implant socialism by shock tactics" (II, 162).
- (5) Vol. 30, "1st Conference on Party Work in the Countryside," p. 146; Vol. 28, "Moscow Party Workers' Meeting," p. 202.
- (6) "On the Peasant Question in France and Germany." Engels had also proposed that under some circumstances, it might not be necessary to use force against the richer peasants. This obviously was not the case in Russia. For Lenin's recommendations on peasant agriculture in the advanced capitalist countries, see Vol. 31, "Preliminary Draft Theses on the Agrarian Question for the 2nd Congress of the CI."
- (7) In fact, in some areas, e.g., the Ukraine, the *Sovkhozy* were actually dismantled and divided up in order to cement this "bloc" with the peasants. See Vol. 30, "Speech Summing Up the Debate on Soviet Power in the Ukraine."
- (8) Vol. 31, "The 8th All-Russia Congress of Soviets," p. 505.
- (9) Vol. 31, "Concluding Remarks at a Conference of Chairman of E.C.," p. 335.
- (10) For a breakdown of the rationing system, see Carr, II, pp. 232-33.
- (11) A formal peace with Poland had yet to be concluded,

Wrangel, backed by the French, remained poised in Turkey ready to strike, and the Japanese threatened the Eastern regions.

(12) Vol. 32, "Speech at Transport Workers' Congress," p. 279.

(13) Trotsky had proposed an ill-thought-out tax in kind measure with individual responsibility in February, 1920. With the Civil War still raging, his proposal had been summarily voted down. At the termination of fighting in December, 1920, SR and Menshevik soviet delegates had proposed similar bills.

(14) For this evidence, see Vol. 32, "10th Congress of the R.C.P.(B.)," pp. 184-5 and "Tax in Kind," pp. 358-59. See also Avrich, pp. 235-40.

(15) See Vol. 33, "We Have Paid Too Much," pp. 330-34.

(16) Vol. 32, "Plan of the Pamphlet 'The Tax in Kind'," p. 320 and "10th All-Russia Conference of R.C.P.(B.)," p. 420.

(17) I refer the reader to Lenin's fullest explanation of state capitalism in Vol. 32, "The Tax in Kind." Compare to his earliest explanation of March, 1918: Vol. 27, "Left-Wing Communism," pp. 323-54 (summarized in Vol. 33, "4th Congress of the CI," pp. 418-21).

(18) Vol. 33, "Better Fewer But Better," p. 499.

(19) This was an uneasy arrangement, as the Soviets were suspicious of American motives. After only a few months, the Committee was disbanded because it was thought to be acting too autonomously, almost as a parallel government.

(20) Carr, II, p. 291.

(21) See Carr, *Interregnum*, pp. 29-30, 95-96, 101-39, 153-4.

(22) Vol. 33, "11th Congress of the R.C.P.(B.)," p. 285.

(23) Vol. 33, "On Co-operation," p. 471.

(24) Vol. 33, "11th Congress of the R.C.P.(B.)," p. 288.

(25) Vol. 33, "To Molotov for Members of Political Bureau," p. 240. The *et al.* included Molotov, who later became one of Stalin's right-hand men.

(26) Vol. 33, "11th Congress of the R.C.P.(B.)," p. 290.

#### Works Consulted

Avrich, Paul. *Kronstadt, 1921*. Princeton University Press, 1970.

Carr, W.H. *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923*, Vol II. Norton, 1985.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Interregnum, 1923-1924*. Pelican Books, 1964.

Getzler, Israel. *Kronstadt, 1917-1921: The Fate of a Soviet Democracy*. Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Lenin, *Works*, Vols. 6, 9, 16, 27-33.

*The second article in a continuing series on the history of the MLP:*

## Organizing in the workplace, Part I: Work in the Trade Unions

by Jake

The Marxist-Leninist Party, USA was well regarded by many leftists for its ability to organize inside factories and other workplaces. Certainly it was hated by the employers it organized against.

The MLP organized in factories to popularize communism and to recruit revolutionary-minded workers. But it was also a major goal of the MLP to be able to launch and lead struggles against the bosses, the capitalists. We had some success in this, particularly in focusing the demands of our co-workers and in finding ways for people to fight back when the workers had no strong organization. It was these small successes which gave the MLP a reputation as a factory organizer.

However, in regard to recruiting revolutionary-minded workers into the Party and to building party organization inside workplaces, the MLP was less successful. Although the MLP did recruit factory workers, it did not bring in enough to offset the number of members who left over the years.

Nor did the MLP build any lasting party organization in workplaces. We did manage to create what we called a "pro-party trend" in several workplaces, but the trend and its nascent organizations did not sustain themselves. In the early 1980s the MLP had expectations that the small organizations and institutions that it was creating in the working class would take on a life of their own as class conflicts intensified. Please note that for the MLP, the 1980s was to be "a decade of great class battles." History read otherwise.

The Party membership declined through the 1980s and early '90s. This declining membership was a factor in the MLP's internal crisis of 1992 and its death in 1993. Since the MLP's major recruiting effort was in the factories at a time when the workers' movement was receding, one might argue that the MLP's policy of factory concentration contributed to its death. However, factory concentration was central to the MLP's politics and its history; to what it was and to who was in it. Furthermore, groups that focused on recruiting elsewhere, for example college campuses or housing projects, did not fare much better. Although recruiting is an issue for revolutionary organizations, I think the failure of the MLP to recruit sufficient members does not negate the

need for socialist revolutionaries to organize in the workplace, especially in industrial production.

The fact that the MLP managed to rally workers for fights against their employers and, moreover, rallied them under a communist banner, was an impressive feat in the 1980s and early '90s.

For the MLP, building organization inside workplaces was essential to organizing the working class and to socialist revolution. As such, MLP activists put a great deal of their energy toward this effort. While it may or may not be accurate to say that, for the MLP as a whole, workplace organizing was our prime activity, it had to run at least a close second. For many Party militants, myself included, organizing in the workplace was our reason to live.

The MLP's approach to organizing in workplaces was to build fighting organizations inside the plants. This organization was not necessarily trade unions, but an apparatus that offered workers who wanted to battle the company a role to play. This approach is markedly different from that of many other left groups who often viewed work in trade unions or the organizing of new trade unions as the essence of workplace organizing.

For example, SWP activists hired into one factory in Chicago (Bodine Electric Company) and were surprised to find that the union was inactive. Since their approach to organizing was based on work inside the union, they couldn't figure out what to do. They soon left for other jobs.

Some years later another SWP activist hired in. She was active against the Persian Gulf War, and she promoted some of the demonstrations taking place against the war. Certainly we welcomed her efforts to organize her co-workers to oppose the war. However, her approach was not to organize a fight against the employers, nor to build organization inside the plant. After the war, she ran for City Clerk.

This isn't to say that the type of approach I attribute to SWP is pointless. It may serve SWP's aims quite well. Furthermore, the idea of concentrating political work inside existing unions has a strong appeal with some worker activists who want to reform the unions and make them real fighting workers' organizations. It then makes sense to focus on places with active unions and leave the unorganized factories for later.

However, this approach will not build fighting organi-

zation on the shop floor nor, in my opinion, can it build a trend for communism.

### **The MLP's trade union policy**

For Marxist-Leninists, trade union work is necessary but not sufficient for workplace organizing. The MLP did have a trade union policy, although it was not as elaborate as the policies of other left organizations. The MLP documents that best explained it are the resolutions of the Second Congress of the MLP. The resolution on "Revolutionary work in the factories and the trade unions" has a section titled "Work in the Trade Unions" which states:

*"The Marxist-Leninist Party carries out work both in the factories and, where they exist, in the trade unions. However, the work in the unions is carried out as a part of the Party's general factory work and not the other way around."* (*Workers' Advocate*, vol. 14 n. 1, January 1984. The full text of this resolution is presented on p. 34).

Basically, if there were an existing union at the workplace, the MLP unit (or cell) that was organizing there was supposed to assess it and decide how much of its energies should go towards work inside that union.

### **What did the MLP do in the unions?**

**Work in union meetings.** As a general rule, we attended union meetings if there were "ordinary workers" present. That is, if it was a meeting of only union functionaries (elected officers, stewards), we didn't bother. If, on the other hand, there was some attendance by the rank and file, or if there was some indication that the rank and file might turn up at the meeting, then the MLP activists had to consider going to the meeting with a plan of action.

When we had a following among the workers at a given plant, we would try to mobilize them to go with us and fight together. Often the motivation for going to a meeting was a feeling among the rank and file that they should go to the union meeting and "do something." The MLP took up the question of what the rank and file should do at those meetings. If the MLP felt it was necessary to issue a call for the workers to attend a meeting, we spelled out in a leaflet exactly what the workers should do there. Not surprisingly, this usually meant opposing the sellout pro-capitalist, capitulationist politics of the labor bureaucrats and pushing for action against the company.

Being a communist revolutionary is often difficult, and for the years that I was active with the MLP, there were

certainly many trying times. But there were also those times when our work bore obvious fruit and reaffirmed our belief in what we were doing. For me, several of these joyous occasions came when the MLP intervened in mass union meetings.

For example, in Detroit during the concessions contract years of 1979 to 1981, Mark Stepp (and Fetchit), head of the UAW's Chrysler section, was ripped to shreds by an MLP activist at a big meeting. Auto workers, angry over the sellout by the UAW leadership, poured out of the union meeting shouting slogans and arguments provided by the MLP speaker. Workers stepped forward to help distribute our leaflets. In other meetings that week, auto workers confronted UAW officials and used our arguments verbatim. We did not succeed in stopping the concessions, but we did concentrate what was wrong with the concessions contracts, and we focused the anger of the workers onto the auto capitalists and their lackeys, rather than on Japanese workers.

**Contract negotiations and ratifications.** The MLP was always involved with union activities and union politics when contracts were at stake. The MLP did not have a policy whether it should try to be on the negotiating team or not, but it did publish and distribute a great deal of literature on contract demands and proposals and ratifications.

Generally, the MLP approached contracts by trying to develop the workers' demands before negotiations started. We wanted to let the rank and file workers, rather than the union leadership, set the tone for the union negotiations.

**Campaigns inside the union.** When the MLP ran campaigns on political issues, it brought them into the workplaces. It might even take them into the union if it was an active organization. This included submitting resolutions to the union meetings in support of mass actions against imperialism or racism, for example. The idea was to encourage workers to take part in those actions and for the union to encourage (rather than discourage) such participation.

**Running for union office.** On rare occasions we ran candidates for office. We even won a few times.

For about one year, the president of the blue-collar union at Roswell Park Hospital in Buffalo was an MLP activist who was elected as a communist running on a platform of "mass active resistance" to the attacks of the hospital administration. The union's executive board removed him from office on baseless charges, but even for

some time after his removal, he was called “the president” by the rank and file and served as a *de facto* union leader.

Once elected to a union position, the activist members of the MLP became so busy with union duties that it left them little time for party work. Partly because of the Roswell Park experience, the MLP’s Central Committee ruled that no member could seek union office without getting permission from the national leadership. This doesn’t mean that the MLP disfavored running candidates in union elections, but it did recognize that for a small organization, winning an election could result in a serious drain of its resources.<sup>1</sup>

Keep in mind that trade union work was generally only a fraction of the party cell’s “general factory work.” However, the General Rules of the MLP<sup>2</sup> did allow for a unit to concentrate most of its efforts on organizing inside the union. For example, if a comrade was elected to a union post, or if circumstances required it, the party cell could be organized as the MLP’s “fraction” inside the union.

**“Organizing the unorganized.”** As far as I know, the MLP did not create any new unions in its history, although it agitated for and supported several organizing drives.

Frequently the *Workers’ Advocate* cited organizing the unorganized as a pressing task for the working class, but a task that the existing pro-capitalist trade unions would never take up in earnest. Since the MLP hated all of the existing unions as pro-capitalist saboteurs of the workers’ movement, it was probably difficult for the MLP to organize new unions with the enthusiasm that it showed in other endeavors.

**Building the existing union.** In practice the MLP did not do much to build the organization of existing unions. This was due largely to the fact that the union bureaucracies were not willing to fight, except against their own militants. Why then, should activists build more organizations for them to misuse? However, at Roswell Park Hospital, the MLP activist who was elected President started a “stewards committee” which proved to be very effective in strengthening the union, and also started a local union publication, the “President’s Newsletter.”

The MLP’s policy was determined by the character of the particular union local. In general terms, the MLP’s press detailed what organization the unions should have if they were to wage a fight, but it was very cautious about building this for the union bureaucracy. For their part, the union officials didn’t want any fighting apparatus.

In open shops, the workers were likely to feel that the

first step in their getting organized was to build the union. This is not necessarily true. Usually what the workers need as their first step is to get themselves somewhat organized on the shop floor.

At Bodine, for example, we did not urge workers to join the union to make it stronger, even though this was what the workers thought we should do. Instead, we urged them to build an apparatus in the plant to be able to fight. Note that the unions at Bodine historically were ambivalent to expanding their own membership. In the early 1980s two worker activists were even fired by the company for attempting to recruit union members, and the circumstances pointed to the IAM as the one who fingered them to the company. A popular rumor in the plant held that there was a secret agreement between Bodine and its two unions (the IAM and IBEW) not to attempt to organize a closed shop.

By organizing themselves and taking action in the plant, Bodine workers were able to hold off concessions demands from the company. Furthermore, in the face of this nascent militancy of the rank and file, the unions suddenly sprouted backbones.

The unions did gain members during this period, and increasing union membership in an open shop is a good thing. But the additional enrollment was a consequence of the shop floor organizing carried out by the MLP and the workers, and not by the union officers.

### **Pushing the Trade Unions to the left?**

For some left groups, not only did organizing in the workplace equal trade union work, but the whole point of trade union work was to take over the union local, or in some cases, to push the union to the left. Now, moving the union to the left would certainly be a good thing, but in practice it did not happen. In this article I don’t want to debate if such a thing is possible. I do want to state that the MLP believed that moving the unions to the left, or transforming them into true fighting organizations for the working class, would require at the very least a huge upsurge in the workers’ movement and probably a revolutionary crisis. Whether the MLP was right or not on this point, it correctly observed that nearly all the groups that organized to “push the unions to the left” followed very rightist policies in regard to the labor bureaucrats. Since these trade union bureaucrats really don’t move much in any direction, especially to the left, the practical politics of this tactic was accommodation to the Trade union bureaucracy.

The MLP, meanwhile, campaigned for the workers to take action, regardless of whether the union’s leadership

or any section of the Trade union bureaucracy supported rank and file action.

Many activists who were trying to organize a fight in the plant fell into the trap of channeling things through the union apparatus. When they realized the union was not working for the workers, the idea of changing the union, reforming it or radicalizing it came up. Unfortunately, many worker activists burned out trying to reform their unions.

The MLP's idea, and in my experience the correct idea, was to radicalize the rank and file. If this was done, it created possibilities for struggle. Even from the angle of reforming the unions and remaking them as organizations of struggle, setting the rank and file in motion was (and is) the only possibility for moving the union to the left!

In the MLP's view, the working class needed trade unions that were real fighting organizations. It had no specific plan for creating them -- mass takeovers of the existing unions, dual unions, or entirely new unions were all considered possibilities -- but it believed totally that it would depend on the mass motion of the rank and file led by a core of radical working class activists who broke from the old politics of the trade union bureaucracy.

#### **Fixations on trade unions and trade union forms**

In the US left, Marxists often seem preoccupied with developing trade unions and concentrating on trade union forms. There are several problems with this.

First, the point of organizing in the workplace is not just to fight in that workplace. Revolutionaries must organize workers for a political revolution to overthrow capitalism, something that is not a trade union endeavor. Workplace organization is useful for mobilizing workers for political activities outside of the plant. In fact the experience of the MLP was that a "pro-party trend" among the workers only developed when workers were brought out to demonstrations and movement activities unrelated to their work. Yet trade unions, especially American trade unions, will not normally participate in oppositional movement politics and usually discourage their membership from doing so.<sup>3</sup> At times mass pressure from the rank and file will lead the union leaders to support *some* limited mass actions or to organize demonstrations themselves. The typical actions endorsed or organized by the AFL-CIO wind up becoming "vote for the Democrats" rallies, no matter how radical they seemed at the outset.

This brings us to the second reason: the trade unions

in the US have really lousy rightist politics. There are a great many shades of this rightism, but the predominant politics of American trade unions result in capitulation to the employers. This has been true throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Even if activists consistently and correctly oppose the pro-capitalist politics of the union leadership, their work will always have very limited results. More likely, revolutionaries with a focus on trade union politics will get stuck organizing on economic issues defined by the trade union. These may be very important issues at certain times, but without bringing revolutionary politics into the workplaces, and without bringing the workers out into the general political motion in society, the politics in the plant will be as drab and lifeless as the typical union meeting.

Third, the trade union leaderships often squash the motion of the workers, this is a consequence of their politics.

The Hormel strike in the 1980s is a graphic example of union bureaucrat treachery against the rank and file of their own union. But in addition to these blatant examples, there is the everyday reality of the union leader's refrain: "Cool down now, just file a grievance and settle it through channels, we don't need to get riled up." In every plant that I have worked in, motion from the rank and file generated a fear response from union officers. Never did I see the union seize the opportunity to develop opposition to the company. Rather, I saw the union throw cold water on the workers. The leaflets of the MLP are rich in details of numerous cases where the trade union officials suppressed the motion of the workers, often with disastrous results.

If we had had to wait for the union before fighting, the MLP would have had no success in organizing workers. Our experience is that we were able to take root when we were willing to act without or even against the union.

Fourth, what if there is no union in the workplace? Following the logic that organizing in the workplace equals work in the trade union, your task would have to be to build a union. But that may not be feasible or, even if feasible, not desirable at a given time.

Organizing a union is difficult and may consume all the energies of the activists working inside the plant and out. It might be better to be "a propaganda group" in such an instance, organizing studygroups for Marxist-Leninist education, for example.

Many experienced activists know that not all places are organizable. One must make a decision to leave such a place or to stay and organize what is possible.



For "agitation," it will be better in some cases to concentrate on organizing politically conscious workers into political activities outside of work (Pro-Choice actions or anti-war demonstrations or even actions at other workplaces) before attempting an organizing drive.

Organizing a union may be too big a step for workers at the time. There are lower forms of organization and many small ways to fight the bosses before winning union recognition. These small steps teach the workers how to fight and how to organize. Completing a series of such small steps may be critical to the success of a future organizing drive.

However, to do these things, one must have an orientation to mobilize the rank and file.

### **Opportunism in defense of the union bureaucracy.**

Yet for some left trends the idea of acting without the union is heresy. Several Trotskyist trends (the Spartacist League is a prime example), believe that the workers should focus on getting the union to act in the workers' interest. Their thinking is that the trade unions are truly the workers' organizations and that they must have the support of the union leadership. The MLP on the other hand, felt the pro-capitalist unions were not the property of the workers and did not act in their class interests.

While there is nothing wrong with asking the union to do the right thing, it is absurd to make union endorsements a goal for workers' actions. In some cases the Sparts took this to the most ridiculous conclusions, applauding corrupt union officials for endorsing their proposals, as if such endorsement was a real victory.

No, focusing this way on the bureaucrats teaches precisely the wrong lesson: that we actually do need some condescending saviors. The MLP believed that the workers have to take action on their own behalf, especially if "their" union is acting against their interests.

Others, following the logic that the bureaucrats are not likely to change, focus on taking over the union leadership. This logic has a powerful hold on worker activists who see the union as the only organization that the workers have. If this is true, then yes, you must get the union to act, for what else is there and what else could there be?

The truth is that trade unions are not all there is to fighting the bosses. Literature distribution networks, phone trees and study groups are forms of organization that can carry out actions like petition campaigns, confront-the-foreman meetings, unannounced slowdowns and other informal work actions.

In Part II of this article, which will appear in the next

issue of *CWVTJ*, we will discuss some of the specifics of how the MLP organized on the shop floor, especially the forms of organization that we used to fight back, with or without a union. ◇

---

### **Notes**

(1) The MLP didn't discuss its factory organizing nor its overall strategy in terms of "agitation group" vs. "propaganda group" as some (especially Trotskyist) organizations do. The MLP saw itself as many things and sometimes as contradictory things: a small theoretical group fighting revisionism and opportunism, but also an activist group with influence in national strikes and mass movements; the core of what will become a new mass revolutionary political party, but also The Party of the U.S. proletariat and an international leader in communist theory; and many other things.

In hindsight, I believe the MLP lacked for discussion on what it was and what it should be. For example, the consequence of winning union elections was considered by Party from the unit up to the Central Committee. They had to face the immediate question of running for office or not, calculating beforehand how much of a drain this would be on the unit organizing at that workplace, and on the other party bodies overseeing their work. Yet it did not make the connection to the more general question of how much of an activist group it should be versus how much of a theoretical group. Repeatedly the problem arose in MLP cells and higher committees that our work was spread out on too many fronts, "overextension" or "overelaboration" it was called in MLP documents. Comrades were admonished repeatedly to "concentrate the work," to pick a smaller area and focus on it, to pick just one place and concentrate it, and so forth. This was and is sound organizational advice, but it did not address the root cause of overextension. In my opinion, the MLP tried to do too much and tried to be too much. This not only led to the burnout of some comrades, it also led to the development of an internal culture that facilitated overextension and may have blocked the MLP's leadership from even considering the root cause, let alone fixing it.

(2) To be published in a future edition of this journal.

(3) Witness the total absence of union support at the 10/31/98 rally against the murder of Dr. Slepian in Buffalo. See page 40 of this journal.

# MLP's Second Congress Resolution, "Revolutionary work in the factories and the trade unions"

*For your information, we are reprinting the resolution from the Second Congress of the Marxist-Leninist Party that describes its trade union policy. It was published in the Workers' Advocate, vol. 14 n. 1, January 1984.*

## **(iii) Revolutionary work in the factories and the trade unions**

### **Work in the Factories and Other Work Places**

In its work to build the revolutionary workers' movement, the Marxist-Leninist Party focuses on the factories and other work places where the workers are concentrated. The factory is not only an arena of exploitation but it is also a center of organization. Here there is a constant confrontation between labor and capital. Here the workers have been concentrated and placed in socialized conditions which lend themselves to the development of discipline and organization. In short, the factories and other work places are natural grounds for the development of class consciousness, organization and struggle.

The Marxist-Leninist Party carries out all-sided work at the factories aimed at developing the class struggle and winning the workers to communism. The Marxist-Leninist Party works to develop the workers' class consciousness through both economic and political agitation.

The Party provides guidance to the economic struggle. It carries out economic exposures and draws out the workings of the capitalist profit system. Both by means of leaflets and daily discussion, the Party rouses the workers, using all sorts of incidents, from major abuses to minor ones, that constantly take place at the factories. The Party actively participates in the strikes and other actions which break out. It uses the daily experience of the workers to expose the treachery and sabotage of the trade union bureaucrats.

The Marxist-Leninist Party brings political agitation to the factories. It distributes leaflets and newspapers on the burning political events of the day. It draws workers from the factories into the Party's political campaigns, such as during elections, demonstrations, and so on. The factory serves as an important base for mobilizing the workers not just in the economic struggle but also into other fronts of struggle and revolutionary work.

The Marxist-Leninist Party trains the workers in revolutionary theory. It shows the workers the tremen-

dous importance of revolutionary theory for the advance of the workers' movement. Thus the Party draws the workers in the factories into the discussion and study of Marxist-Leninist theory, using a variety of forms for this purpose. It encourages the workers to pay attention to and participate in the ideological and political controversies between Marxism-Leninism and opportunism.

In the course of all its work, the MLP strives to build up revolutionary organization at the work places. It seeks to build a wide range of organizational forms, from very loose to tightly knit ones. The Party works hard to bring forward workers who are enthusiastic to support one or another front of the Party's work.

The core that the MLP seeks to build at the factories is the party organization itself. This provides leadership and guidance to all other forms of organization among the workers. The MLP pays special attention to developing an organized pro-party trend. Thus, while working closely with workers who support only one or another front of the Party's work, the MLP recognizes that ultimate success in building organization at the factories depends on building up the Marxist-Leninist trend among the workers, the trend which supports the all-round work of the Party.

In the course of the development of the class struggle, the workers also spontaneously set up various forms of organization to advance their fight. These organizations do not exist in a vacuum, but are immediately influenced by various political trends. If these groups are to prosper and contribute to the general political motion of the working class, they must resolutely break away from all capitalist, reformist and opportunist trends. The Marxist-Leninist Party encourages and welcomes the spontaneous urge of the workers for organization, pays close, comradely attention to the working class organizations that are thus formed, and seeks to influence such organizations to adopt policies which are consistently and truly independent of the capitalists and the labor bureaucrats. In this way, the MLP strives to have these groups play their full role in the class struggle and to win them over to the side of revolutionary Marxism-Leninism.

The work of the MLP in the factories today is laying the foundations for building up the factories as the fortresses of revolutionary communism in the future.

### **Work in the Trade Unions**

The Marxist-Leninist Party carries out work both in

the factories and, where they exist, in the trade unions. However, the work in the unions is carried out as a part of the Party's general factory work and not the other way around.

The trade unions historically came up as the most elementary form of organization among the workers. They originated out of the efforts of the workers to organize in defense of their interests against the abuses of the capitalists. They emerged out of the recognition that, as individuals, the workers are helpless before the employers and that competition among themselves is only helpful to the capitalists.

These factors remain important in how the workers approach the unions today. This is why the workers who belong to unions look to them to defend their day-to-day interests. And when workers organize into unions today, it is these ideas which motivate them to do so. The simplest and most elementary idea of organization is the need to unite in the economic struggle against the employers, a necessity comprehensible even to the most politically inexperienced sections of the working class.

At the same time, the trade unions in the U.S. today have very serious problems and cannot be regarded as true proletarian unions. The trade union apparatus has long been captured by a reactionary and deeply entrenched bureaucracy which has imposed a pro-capitalist policy on the unions. This bureaucracy defends capitalism and constantly undermines the struggle of the workers against exploitation. As a result, the capitalists are able to use the union bureaucracy to pacify and discipline the workers. Indeed, it is precisely because of this that large numbers of workers are more and more discontented with the unions.

In order to carry through their treacherous policy, the union bureaucracy has established a corrupt anti-democratic regime in the unions. Using the most highhanded methods, they ride roughshod over the rank and file and suppress any attempt by the workers to resist the bureaucrats' treachery inside the unions. As well, the unions have over the years become more and more integrated into the capitalist state apparatus. A ton of laws, rules and regulations weighs down on the unions to shackle the workers from being able to wage any effective struggles against the capitalists.

As part of their treachery, the union bureaucrats raise the watchword of "trade union neutrality" with respect to political questions. This slogan is a fraud because the bureaucrats have actually hitched the unions to the side of the capitalists and their political parties. They constantly take part in political campaigns on the side of the bourgeoisie. Some union bureaucrats, like the notorious leaders of

the Teamsters union, support the Republican Party, but the overwhelming majority of the bureaucrats are partisans of the Democratic Party. They are active flunkies of the Democratic Party, and in the last few years the AFL-CIO has stepped up its integration with the Democratic Party even further. As well, when the bureaucrats want to give a profound cover to their squelching of the mass struggle, they sometimes whine that the mass struggle is useless because the question must be solved politically, by which, they are quick to explain, they mean voting for the Democratic Party. All this might make it appear, on the surface, as if the labor bureaucrats had abandoned the slogan of "trade union neutrality." But let the workers try to support any progressive cause in their unions, let them oppose U.S. imperialism or call for a real struggle against racism and reaction, and the trade union bureaucrats are quick to bring back the slogan of "trade union neutrality" and to beat their breasts about how divisive political issues are, how the unions should steer clear of politics, etc., etc. Trade union neutrality always was and is still today a hypocritical slogan directed against socialism and revolutionary politics. It was never intended to be and never does restrict the union bureaucrats from taking the most politically partisan stands, so long as these stands are pro-capitalist, anti-communist and reactionary stands.

In fact the unions can never be politically neutral. Their activity must inevitably help one side or the other; either the trade unions help develop the independent political stand of the workers, or they help shackle the workers to the capitalist parties. Thus the workers should tear down the fraudulent banner of the "neutrality" of the trade unions. Proper trade unions should help their members to take a conscious part in political life. They should support the proletarian party against the capitalist parties. But trade unions should use the political methods appropriate to trade unions. For example, they should not expel or harass workers with differing political views, but seek to unite all workers, irrespective of their views, who see the need to resist the capitalists.

Although the American trade unions have been captured by the agents of the capitalists, this does not mean that the Marxist-Leninists and class conscious workers should boycott them. By no means. The trade union form of organization remains important for the workers' movement. As well, the unions are still composed of workers and the workers inside them look to them to defend their interests.

Indeed it is precisely because of the importance of the trade union form that the bourgeoisie has put so much effort in establishing its domination over the unions. The

bourgeoisie knows that the unions are a powerful lever for directing the working class movement forward or backward.

For this very reason, the class conscious proletariat must fight on the trade union front. It must fight to bring into being a situation where the trade union form of organization is in the hands of the working class. The Marxist-Leninist Party believes that it is essential to work inside the unions. The question is not whether to take part in the present trade unions or not, but what policy should guide work inside the unions. Revolutionary work in the unions is not aimed at achieving a reconciliation with the trade union bureaucracy. Rather it is aimed at winning the masses of workers to the class struggle and revolution. It is aimed at eliminating the influence of the bureaucrats among the workers.

Thus revolutionary work in the unions is not aimed at creating illusions that somehow the bureaucracy can be reformed or "moved to the left." The trade unions have become so heavily bureaucratized and the stranglehold of the government's rules and regulations is so heavy that there can be no illusions about some easy road to the victory of a policy of class struggle in the unions. Indeed many militant workers have come to grief because they placed their hopes in turning the unions around through reforming the bureaucrats.

The development of the workers' movement must inevitably proceed through the setting up of unions with a genuinely proletarian policy. But there are no shortcuts to achieving this. It is only the development of a most intense class struggle on the part of the workers which will bring proletarian unions into being. Only the class struggle can shake up and smash the weight of bureaucratic tutelage and the shackles of the government's rules and regulations. And only the course of the mass struggle will

determine the method by which the proletarian unions will be formed. In this regard, the question of whether the current trade unions will be radically transformed in one way or another, or whether entirely new unions will come into existence, can only be determined by the course of the actual struggle.

Today the foundations of the future revolutionary trade unions of the workers are being laid by the work of the Marxist-Leninist Party. The MLP works tirelessly to encourage the workers to take up the road of class struggle and independent organization. The development of the actual struggle is crucial for educating the workers on the need for independent action and organization.

In its work in the trade unions, the Marxist-Leninist Party orients its entire work to winning the rank and file. It carries work directly among the workers and as well it utilizes work inside the trade union apparatus (for example, running in trade union elections). Since this apparatus is controlled by the reactionary bureaucrats, the Marxist-Leninists cherish no illusions about this apparatus. Work inside the apparatus can only be a subsidiary front of work, which must be coordinated with direct work among the workers. The aim of work in the apparatus is to facilitate winning the workers over to a revolutionary policy.

Central to the progress of revolutionary work on the trade union front is the building up and extension of the influence and organization of the Marxist-Leninist Party among the workers. The organization of the class conscious vanguard is essential to providing orientation for the independent organization of the workers. It is essential to organizing every front of struggle by the workers. <

*Available now in pamphlet form, the complete series:*

## **Rosa Luxemburg, Semi-Anarchism -- and Trotsky**

by Barb

**\$6.00** (includes shipping)

ISBN: 0-86714-028-3

Order from: **CWV**  
**P.O. Box 11542**  
**Chicago IL 60611**

email: [mlbooks@mcs.com](mailto:mlbooks@mcs.com)

*Ben (Seattle) replies to a member of the Leninist-International list on the MLP's history:*

## **Being Disliked by the “major players” was to the MLP's credit!**

*The article below is taken from a message thread on the Leninist-International list.*

Hi [Another] and other readers,

Again I must apologize that it has taken me so long to reply.

[Another] posting on August 3:

>By the way, I very much liked your post on “Death of a Charlatan [Hardial Bails],” which I passed to a number of friends. However, if I understood correctly, you came out of the MLP, which, besides its anti-Stalinist turn, had a very suspicious history (I can document this) and was also never taken seriously by any other forces within the US. I would like to hear more of what you think of this, either through the list or directly.

<

[Another] (August 8):

>First, on the group in Nicaragua; yes it is true that they supported the imperialist coalition in the elections that defeated the Sandinistas. However, they were a group that, at least in the US was mainly promoted by the MLP, an organization which as I said before never had any political legitimacy. I do not know whether the group in Nicaragua was ever “for real” or not.

[Ben Replies:]

My opinion [Another], is that you are misinformed about the MLP. I was a supporter of the MLP from 1978 until its dissolution in November 1993. For approximately half of that time I was a member. The MLP was definitely “for real” and so was the party in Nicaragua, MAP-ML with which we established relations.

You are raising very interesting questions and I am grateful to have an opportunity to clear up any questions that anyone may have about the MLP. My view, as many are aware, is that the communications revolution is going to lead to a quantitative and qualitative change in the communist movement. This is still in its very earliest stages—but already we can all see significant changes in the way that information is becoming accessible. The left ecosystem is in the process of becoming “transparent” and, in my view, it is only a matter of time before this changes everything.

The example of Hardial Bains is instructive. Our movement has suffered much from charlatanism and

many other diseases. But these diseases will not survive the advent of transparency. Charlatanism and sectarianism will be the first to go. We can already see the beginnings of this. The intensity of the class struggle in society will determine the pace of the next step. But whether it is fast or slow, it will happen; as surely as the day follows night, the influence of reformism will be punctured.

Consider: for years you have been carrying around in your head what appears to be a very inaccurate picture of the MLP. And now it can be cleared up ;-)

The nature of the way that information has been and will be transmitted within the left is critical. The “left ecosystem” created in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in a great deal of unprincipled sectarian street-fighting. This was the environment which has shaped us all. The first casualty of war is the truth. And our experience is that activists and workers would get accurate information about who and what we were — only from our own efforts.

I believe it is accurate to say that the MLP was intensely disliked by every “major player” within the various mass movements. And we certainly did not have “political legitimacy” in the sense of your meaning above.

But the question that must be asked is whether this was to our credit. I know that there were many mass actions, sponsored by dozens of organizations of various kinds, where we would not allow the name of our organization to appear on the official leaflet announcing the event, but would instead create our own leaflet — with slogans which we felt did not in some essential way deceive the masses — and which our minuscule organization would distribute in greater number than all the official sponsoring organizations combined. Now the activists who might come to the demo because they heard about it from us would understand that our activity was working to build the demo and build the movement. But the official leadership of the demo generally would not appreciate our efforts.

I vividly recall a large demonstration in support of the struggle of the people of El Salvador. This was probably around 1981. The banner of our contingent read: “Down with US Imperialism! Victory to the people of El Salvador”. This slogan was not acceptable to the official sponsors of the demo, an organization named “Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador” (CISPES). The problem was that we were using a banned ultra-left

word: “imperialism”. And the banned I-word was not acceptable to the allies of CISPES within the Democratic Party (people such as Mike Lowry — who later became Governor — and others). A CISPES representative informed us that we would have to remove our banner.

Now I should add that our banner was at the periphery of the demo. We weren’t trying to take over the stage or anything like that. Rather, we believed that activists should be given a clear explanation of why the US was trying to crush the struggle of the Salvadoran people. And any scientific answer to that question had to explain the nature of the political and economic system that was behind this. And that system had a scientific name. And that scientific name was “imperialism”.

We told the representative from CISPES that we believed that the demonstration was not the property of any organization because no one could own it. We said it was our democratic right to give anti-intervention activists our view on why the US was carrying out this brutal war. And we explained that we would defend our democratic right. Minutes later CISPES sent over the “goon squad”.

Now this turned out to be something of a joke. The “goon squad” consisted of young activists who had been warned the night before by CISPES that it might be necessary to defend the demo against people who might try to disrupt it. These young activists had been led to believe that the disruption might be something organized by reactionaries. They were shocked when they discovered that they were being asked to violently suppress our banner. They could not see what was wrong with the word “imperialism” and agreed with us that we had every right in the world to have such a banner at a demo that was, after all, being organized against imperialist intervention. In fact I knew one of these activists and had had many political discussions with him in the weeks leading up to the demo. I had told him during these discussions that the anti-intervention movement could only be effective if it fought to be independent of its liberal “friends” in the Democratic Party who would undermine it once the time was ripe. This activist now saw with his own eyes the utter spinelessness of CISPES and he was (quite correctly) disgusted by what he saw.

It is probably not necessary to say that actions of this type did not endear us to organizations like CISPES. And, from the perspective of groups such as this, we never did have “legitimacy”. But I would argue that this was to our credit.

And the same dynamic exists (to a much smaller degree — because there is no movement and the stakes are not so high) even today. On the old M-I list I argued that the decisive task to rebuild a communist movement

must be to create organization that was independent of bourgeois control — and that organizations like the Labor Party (in the US) and Jesse Jackson’s campaign in 1988 were not independent of bourgeois control. As a result of this, I aroused the wrath of a respected and skilled contributor to M-I, Louis Proyect, who was moved to declare that I “have absolutely no credentials in the mass movement” and was a “political virgin”. (Anyone can check this out themselves at [www.Leninism.org/stream/98/reformism.htm](http://www.Leninism.org/stream/98/reformism.htm) where I have collected a number of posts from all sides of this tempest in a teacup — please see the conclusion of post #33). I think anyone will be able to see for themselves that I was not trying to provoke Louis and was treating him with respect — but that my political stand in favor of independence from bourgeois control places me on one side of the major fault line that runs through all the mass movements. And this is the source of the contradiction.

### Suspicious history?

I should respond, [Another], to your query about the “suspicious history” of the MLP. In the early 1970s we attempted to merge with an organization that turned out to be cops.<sup>1</sup> I don’t know much about this because it was before my time. But it is likely the source of stories about us that would be distorted or exaggerated in the sectarian atmosphere of the movement at that time. Also, at one time we supported Jonas Savimbi and UNITA in Angola. This was only a year or so before it was revealed that he was in a secret alliance with the CIA and South Africa. So this could be a source of rumors also.

Both of these incidents reflected inexperience and poor judgement on our part. But it is clear to me that the enmity we earned from the official leaders of the movement was not because of what we did that was wrong — but because of what we did that was right.

### Dissolution of the MLP

The MLP dissolved itself in November 1993.

My view is that the MLP died because, as an organization, it lacked the courage to face up to its internal contradictions.

I was at the final congress and took part in the discussion leading up to it. Eventually all of this material will be posted on the web.

Unfortunately, most of the members and supporters of the MLP went passive at that time. Approximately one-third of the 40 members and supporters of the MLP are still politically active as follows:

1) The Communist Voice Organization (Joseph Green, Mark and a few others at [www.flash.net/~comvoice](http://www.flash.net/~comvoice)). Mostly, this descended from the Detroit branch of the MLP but it also includes supporters from a few other cities, including Seattle. Joseph was the head of the Central Committee of the MLP.

2) The *Chicago Workers' Voice* group: [www.mcs.com/~mlbooks](http://www.mcs.com/~mlbooks) Descended from the Chicago branch of the MLP. They put out a journal approximately twice a year.<sup>2</sup> One of their supporters is Jack Hill who is subbed to this list.

3) Neil (who sometimes contributes here) at: [74742.1651@compuserve.com](mailto:74742.1651@compuserve.com) ... in Los Angeles. He is now affiliated with the "communist-left" at: <http://www.ibrp.org>. Neil's activity, in my view, is not at all representative of the quality of work which characterized the MLP.

4) Myself.

Both the Detroit and Chicago groups wrote articles in the summer of 1996 on the nature of the Labor Party in the US and these articles can be found at [www.Leninism.org/stream/98/reformism.htm](http://www.Leninism.org/stream/98/reformism.htm) (see posts #34 and #35). I consider both of these articles to be well-written and accurate.

My opinion is that, unfortunately, many of the former supporters of the MLP who are still active — have not proven resistant to the disease of sectarianism. This disease can be cured but often it simply lingers for year after year. One symptom of this is that most of these people refuse to have anything to do with me, saying that I am conducting a "war on Marxism" or similar nonsense. The reason for this is that I have put out polemics which have criticized them with great accuracy and they find it hard to deal with this. In fact, some of these polemics form "The Self-Organizing Moneyless Economy" which can be seen at: [www.Leninism.org/some](http://www.Leninism.org/some).

There has been a fair amount of discussion on these lists concerning exactly what sectarianism is. I believe a useful way to understand it is as a failure to see the possibilities of principled cooperation with activists that one considers to be profoundly mistaken. As I have said, I believe forums such as this one will help many to overcome this disease.

As far as dealing with passivity, my view is that what is important is to show that revolutionary work can still be done: that it does not have to be excruciatingly difficult and that it will accomplish something very worthwhile. Most of the pain is a result of the self-deception, sectarianism or ideological problems that are symptoms of the crisis in communist theory. I believe that as it becomes more clear

that revolutionary work can be done — that more people will join in the effort, including, maybe, some of the former supporters of the MLP who have become passive.

The main vehicle for my work will be the web-based news service.

As far as the stand in the elections of the Nicaraguan group, MAP-ML, my memory of this is dim and I have no hard information about it. All the same, in the light of my experience I consider it highly likely that the accusation that they "supported the imperialist coalition" is nothing but a gross distortion. What is more likely is that they did not support the Sandinistas. And this is not the same thing. What we would need here would be some hard information.

Ben Seattle

—//— 23.Aug.98

(1) CWVTJ will discuss this incident in a later article. There were two FBI-created organizations that tried to infiltrate a predecessor of the MLP in the early 1970's. These groups were welcomed by Hardial Bains but ACWM(ML) was suspicious of them. I believe that they did not succeed in penetrating the MLP's predecessors. They were soon exposed. However, they may have penetrated Bains' group, the CP of Canada (ML). While the FBI may or may not have done any damage to our Canadian comrades, CPC(ML) certainly damaged COUSML by implying at the time that their American comrades were the source of the FBI infiltration.

(2) Actually this is supposed to be a quarterly journal but we won't get four issues out this year.

# Buffalo Rallies Against Doctor's Murder by Anti-Abortion Terrorists

*Editor's Note:*

*The report below came to us via E-mail. The Oct. 31 demonstration in Buffalo was an important response to the sniper murder of an abortion provider. In the pro-choice defense of Buffalo during the "Spring of Life" in 1992, Dr. Slepian's clinic on Main Street was the main target of the anti-abortion fascists. The defenders kept this clinic open and Dr. Slepian continued his practice until his murder.*

*There is a pattern to this murder. Every year around the US holiday Veterans Day and the Canadian holiday Remembrance Day, two doctors providing abortion services are murdered somewhere in Canada and somewhere in the US near the Canadian border. Pro-choice activists have warned that the murderer may strike again this week, somewhere in Canada.*

*In addition to this article, an activist in Buffalo reported to us that one of the "Skunk" brothers (Minister Robert Schenk) returned to Buffalo to lay roses at Dr. Slepian's clinic for his wife and children. Mrs. Slepian returned his roses, along with an appropriately nasty letter which was printed in the Buffalo News.*

*Another anti-abortion cretin, Bob Behn of the "Last Call Ministry," announced shortly after the murder of Dr. Slepian, that there will be another "Spring of Life" in Buffalo in 1999.*

*If there is, Chicago Workers' Voice wants everyone to be there and, once more, kick the anti's in the head.*

## Report from Paul Zarembka, 11/5/98.

**"END THE SILENCE, STOP THE VIOLENCE,  
DRAW THE LINE IN BUFFALO"**

**"WE WILL NOT BE INTIMIDATED"**

People from Buffalo, Rochester, Cleveland, New York City, Atlanta, and Laramie rallied together October 31 to protest the murder eight days earlier by sniper fire of Dr. Barnett A. Slepian, OB-GYN specialist who included abortion in his practice, a practice available to poor women.

The killing was at Slepian's home in front of his wife

and children. I would estimate attendance at 700 (the Buffalo News reports "several hundred"), perhaps somewhat larger than a union-organized rally for education and the arts four years earlier but smaller than a rally against a Nazi demonstrating on M. L. King's birthday in 1981 (all in the same location).

The rally was mainly organized by local pro-choice forces, with some help from "Refuse and Resist" and the "National People's Campaign". "Refuse and Resist" impressed me by the speed of their out-of-town response to come to Buffalo. There was no open support nor organizing for the rally by unions, to my knowledge, and I did not see any union banners at the rally, even from unions which have explicit pro-choice policy positions and women in leadership. Pro-choice forces thus receive a message that unions will not help when they are down. Such lack of solidarity has been a perennial problem for progressive forces in the U.S.

Demonstrators were more women than men, minorities were under-presented but present. (There was one counter-demonstrator.)

The rally had a large number of speakers and was over two hours long. I am sure any report will slight some of the 30 speakers (to whom I can only apologize). However, I have been asked and I'll do my best. No report could begin without acknowledging the suffering and anger of the Slepian family. Dr. Slepian had been constantly a target for intimidation while practicing at the only clinic in the Buffalo area providing abortions (there are now only two doctors left in Buffalo providing most abortions; temporarily, doctors from out-of-town are stepping into Slepian's place). He and his family long ago decided he would NOT be intimidated. His wife Lynne still maintains that same position, even after her husband was killed—killed so fast "I never got a chance to say 'goodbye'". A newspaper interview quotes his wife as saying "He taught his boys to respect women's rights and not to let anyone else change their mind. Those four boys are proud that their dad had such convictions."

Before beginning, I think it is important to comment on a controversy around police protection of the Slepian's. The Slepian's live in a wealthy neighborhood and had decided NOT to move about four years ago partly because they have had a very good relationship to the local police. The controversy about the local police centers on three factors: that six hours before the shooting Mrs.



Slepian had faxed the police a warning they had received to be especially cautious this time of year (around Veterans Day in the U.S., Remembrance Day in Canada); that the police call that went out after the shooting did not refer to a shooting, allowing time for the killer to escape; and that a call to the Canadian border control did not take place until four hours later (the closest Canadian border can be reached in perhaps 25 minutes from the home). On the first, Mrs. Slepian said she had not expected immediate attention from the police to her fax and the police chief said his office had not been informed of the significance of Remembrance Day for anti-choice forces in Canada. On the second, the police chief played a recording of the original call that went out and it did include a reference to shooting. I have not seen a response to the issue of the lateness of the border contact. I can only comment that the killer was apparently very professional, not even leaving the expended shell at the scene; thus, I wonder if he would have risked a nearby border crossing at that time.

What is the point? Suburban police protection for its white/wealthy residents is often quite different from city police for its black residents. It is very possible that they were doing the competent protection which could reasonably have been expected for this particular doctor and his family (contrast the frame-up by the Philadelphia police of Mumia Abu-Jamal). In hindsight, it would have been great if a patrol car had gone into the area earlier that night and every night for the next "whatever" time. In any case, please keep in mind that Mrs. Slepian defends her local police against accusations and that the larger issue of protection of clinics and staff and of failure to vigorously investigate and stop a national conspiracy by extreme right-wing forces is largely untouched by her reaction.

The rally? The single most important statement must be attributed to Marilyn Buckham, executive director of the Buffalo GYN Womenservices clinic where Dr. Slepian worked. She read a letter from Lynne Slepian who said that she wanted to be there. The clear message from both: **THIS CLINIC MUST REMAIN OPEN AND WE MUST FIND MORE OB-GYN DOCTORS WILLING TO EXERCISE THEIR PROFESSIONAL SPECIALITY. ANYTHING LESS WOULD BE A FAILURE TO HONOR THE LIFE OF DR. SLEPIAN.** Buckham pointed out that some clinic employees have already left and that the clinic is in trouble with its survival. She said that she had met with Attorney General Janet Reno the prior Wednesday and the Justice Department is setting up an investigative task force, but that generally the police authorities don't pay attention to the intimidation by anti-choice forces. Furthermore, the anti-choice rhetoric car-

ries with it a heavy burden of intolerance.

The Slepian family has designated the Pro-Choice Network of Buffalo, P.O. Box 461, Buffalo, New York 14209, 882-2029, for donations in honor of Barnett Slepian. At the rally Kathy McGuire of the Network and of Buffalo United for Choice said that the Network is planning to use donations to address the issue of access to abortions. McGuire demanded that the anti-choice people change their language as abortion is NOT murder in this country, and noted that we all needed more courage facing the future. She also said that we must exercise our right to vote for pro-choice candidates (within the crowd the Network distributed its list of voting records/endorsements for Tuesday's elections).

The issue of voting for Pro-Choice candidates is not as easy as implied. To give an example, the Democratic candidate for Senator Charles Schumer (against D'Amato) is listed as Pro-Choice but other candidates for that office are simply ignored in the literature handed out. The Green Party candidate Joel Kovel for Senator is also Pro-Choice, and arguably more so than Schumer since Kovel also wants a single-payer health care system which would allow permit access independent of income; similarly for the Socialist Workers candidate Rose Ana Berbeo. And more telling comments can be made for the office of New York Governor, since neither the Democratic nor Republican candidate is listed as Pro-Choice, while other candidates are ignored.

A lawyer for the Pro-Choice Network, Glenn Murray, spoke and noted that Dr. Slepian wondered why so few doctors choose his path of refusing to be intimidated. I think this is a critical human question and reminds one of similar questions asked of the level of resistance in Nazi Germany (I understand that getting rid of the right to abortion was one of the first acts of Hitler's government). He went on to demand that doctors be protected.

A representative of the YWCA told us that the YMCA has been pro-choice since 1970 (three years BEFORE Roe versus Wade) and that the YWCA principle is to empower women.

The New York Director of NOW Lois Shapiro - Canter demanded that Reno investigate CONSPIRACY—that this murder is not just an isolated act as the Justice Department inaction suggests it is.

The Western New York Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice pointed out how large the spectrum of religions are for choice. If I am not mistaken, Catholic women have as high a rate of choosing abortions as women of other faiths, and black women have a much

*Continued on bottom of next page, See **Buffalo***

# Review of the video documentary "Struggles in Steel": Racism in the Workplace

by Jack Hill

In the spring of this year a video documentary was shown on public television entitled, "Struggle in Steel". It attempts to document the experience of African American steelworkers. The video mainly consists of interviews with African American steelworkers from around the country. The steelworkers who are interviewed give dramatic accounts of the racial discrimination that they faced and some of their struggles against it. Overall I certainly recommend this video for those interested in understanding the history of racial discrimination in the steel industry and the collaboration of the steelworkers union with this discrimination.

In this article I would like to highlight some of the significant points of the video from my point of view and to raise some issues that are not fully dealt with in the video.

## Points from the video

The stimulus for making this documentary was the outrage felt by an African American steelworker at a documentary shown on Pittsburgh TV about unemployed steelworkers which did not show any African Americans among the unemployed. This African American steelworker teamed up with a white documentary film maker (who had also been a steelworker) to produce this video.

The main overall point of the video is to show how

African Americans were consistently locked into the worst jobs: the dirtiest, the most dangerous, and the lowest paid. In particular this meant that many of the jobs in the coke ovens and the blast furnaces were reserved for African Americans. Only a few, relatively clean and higher paid jobs in these areas were always reserved for whites. A number of workers give very moving accounts of how they were kept out of more desirable jobs. One black steelworker tells how he struggled for years to get a chance at a crane operator's job. He came in early to watch how they did their job. He repeatedly asked for the chance to fill any crane operator opening that occurred. Finally the foreman told him to go run the crane. He did the job even though he got no break-in training as a white operator would have received.

The video makes the point that in spite of African Americans being locked into the hardest, dirtiest and lowest paid jobs in the steel mills, steel mill jobs were about the best jobs available to African Americans in many cities. Racial oppression is and has been a constant feature throughout our whole society.

The video traces some of the early history of black steelworkers. In 1919 there was a national steel strike and the workers were defeated. The steel companies, at least in the north, had never allowed African Americans to work in the mills. However, when steelworkers went on strike, 30,000 African Americans were given steel mill jobs to try to break the strike. Then, as soon as the strike

*Continued on next page*

---

## Buffalo, continued from previous page

higher rate than white, due to poverty.

A spokeswoman for Planned Parenthood of Niagara County asked telling questions as to WHY OB-GYN specialists are allowed to choose which portion of their speciality they can include in patient care and which not (i.e., abortion). She asked what would happen if all fire fighters but a few refused to go into burning homes? Would not the life-threatening burden be born by those few and wouldn't we find that unacceptable? Medical Students for Choice spoke to the issue of training more doctors and hand out leaflets. Their spokesperson told us that a first-trimester abortion in a hospital can cost \$2000.

Before the rally actually began, a woman who helped organize the rally asked another person and me to watch for any strange persons in the rally crowd and to call to

security's attention anything strange happening in the windows overlooking the rally. I could not help but be reminded of the Dallas book depository building but everything was completely peaceful, with police blocking off road access for most of the rally.

Since the murder of Dr. Slepian, I have had the feeling of being in a war zone. It has also awakened in me more than ever before the fragility of reproductive choice, and, in turn, of women's rights and of other rights (again, I point to Mumia not receiving a fair trial, nor the right of retrial; we all now know of murders in Jasper, Texas and Laramie, Wyoming, and many other acts of right-wing violence and intimidation). We know that only our mobilization, reaching out to new people and young people, is going to provide an answer. ◇

was over, they were kicked out on the street. William Z. Foster, who was involved in organizing this strike, says that the use of African American strikebreakers was not the main factor breaking the strike. He says the main factor was the refusal of the skilled craft unions to support the mass of unskilled steelworkers. (William Z. Foster, *The Negro People in American History*, International Publishers, New York, 1954) At that time the only unions existing in the steel industry were small skilled craft unions which were reactionary and racist to the core. They were dedicated to preserving the relative privileges of a few skilled workers against the mass of unskilled steel workers. African Americans could not get these jobs and could not join these "unions". The racist politics of these unions certainly was a factor undermining this struggle.

In the '20s and '30s African Americans did gradually get jobs in the northern steel mills (in the segregated conditions I mentioned before). Then, in the mid-1930s while the steelworkers union was being organized, African Americans played a key role in this organizing. Several of the African American workers interviewed in the documentary either participated themselves or told of their fathers' work in organizing. As some of these workers pointed out, African Americans had an even greater need for union protection than the white workers. The Steel Workers' Organizing Committee (SWOC) had an official policy against discrimination. However, after the union was recognized, African Americans never seemed to get the good union jobs. In fact the union did not fight to end racial discrimination at the workplace.

During World War II the video mentions two (wild-cat) strikes by African American steelworkers in particular plants demanding equality in pay. In 1946 the USWA established a civil rights department, but it wasn't until 1958 that an African American was put in charge of this department. Thereafter he was inundated with appeals from black workers for help in fighting cases of discrimination.

Official racial discrimination continued in steel up through the '60s and early '70s. The video concentrates on the legal challenge that led to the Consent Decree of 1974. African American steelworkers sued the steel companies and the steelworkers union under the civil rights laws. One worker from Birmingham, Alabama, told how he had made a written record of all the discriminatory acts that he had suffered and how he had safeguarded this record for years. (The Consent Decree was the legal settlement of this lawsuit. I don't have a complete list of its provisions.)

The Consent Decree required the steel companies to pay \$30 million in reparations to African American steel-

workers who had suffered discrimination. The caucus of African American steelworkers who started the suit had wanted \$500 million. Several steelworkers who appear on the video denounce the pitifully small amounts of the individual awards, for example, \$600 for 30 years of discrimination! Many African American steelworkers refused these paltry checks.

In fact the steel companies and many local union officials resisted implementing the Consent Decree. The African American steelworkers went back to court and got a second Consent Decree. According to commentary in the video this second Consent Decree has produced some real change. Seniority rules were modified so that African American workers who had been locked in to particular jobs for years and decades were given the opportunity to move to more desirable jobs. The steel companies were required to offer training programs to current employees so that they could qualify for the more skilled jobs. Testing procedures were changed to eliminate some of the more unrealistic and arbitrary aspects of many tests for skilled jobs. One should note that all of these changes opened up more opportunities for all of the ordinary production workers of all races. By the late '70s more African Americans and more women were being hired, and more of them were getting into the skilled trades.

However, by the early '80s the steel industry was in a phase of massive layoffs and mill closings. Steel mills in the Pittsburgh area were hit particularly hard. Many of the veteran African American steelworkers lost their jobs. The video shows steel mills being knocked down and discussions by former steelworkers on how they are making ends meet now. One of the obvious conclusions of the video is that now the biggest problem for many African American steelworkers is that they don't have a job at all.

At several points in the video, various African American steelworkers make the point that African Americans need a strong union even more than white steelworkers do. One man in particular emphasizes that he feels a bad union is better than no union because if you do have a union you can fight to take it over and make it defend you. Certainly we should fight inside the steelworkers Union against racist practices. However, I don't think it is automatically true that a bad union is better than no union. Sometimes a bad union can make it even more difficult for workers to organize themselves than having no union. (For more discussion on unions, see Jake's article on the MLP's trade union policy, page 29.)

One of the basic themes of the video is that, while African American steelworkers have been solidly pro-

union and have made many sacrifices to build the Steelworkers Union, the union leadership has often betrayed the African American steelworkers.

## Comments

The video takes for granted that the viewer will be opposed to racial discrimination. This is a reasonable assumption. Most ordinary people surely are outraged by the experiences recounted by the African American steelworkers on the video. Perhaps it is worthwhile to spend a little time discussing where the source of this racial discrimination lies and what effects it has on steelworkers.

Racial discrimination and racism have been constant features of capitalism since it was born. Most readers of this journal are, no doubt, aware of how capitalism uses racial discrimination and racist ideology as a fundamental weapon against the working class. In particular, in the U.S., racism has been one of the most potent weapons of the capitalist class against the struggle of the oppressed. Many excellent articles have shown this history in detail. I don't propose to repeat that material here.

However, I should mention what I believe the main points to be. 1) Racial oppression and the racist ideology which justifies this oppression are tools of capitalism which divide workers and set them against each other. Many working class struggles have been undermined in this way. 2) Racial discrimination means greater profits for the capitalists. African American workers are forced to accept lower pay and worse working conditions than white workers. The capitalists pay less for the same work. 3) The struggle against racial oppression is one of the key struggles of the whole working class. Recall the famous quote from Marx that, "Labor in the white skin can never be free while in the black it is branded." Marx and Engels also analyzed the struggles of the workers in Britain and came to the conclusion that the English workers needed to support the struggle of the Irish masses as part of their own struggle. Following this analogy, and the common sense that workers have to fight together against their capitalist class enemies, the MLP stressed that white workers must take up the struggle against racial discrimination and racism as their own.

More particular questions also come to mind in relation to this video. In the first place we need to look at what issues of racial discrimination still exist in the steel industry and in the steelworkers union. Moving on from that we need to look at overall strategy for dealing with this issue. Then, of course, one could look at the history and current situation of other racial and ethnic minorities in the steel

industry. In many mills there is a substantial proportion of Latino workers, particularly of Mexican nationality. In the Chicago area, for example, Mexican nationality workers have been working in the steel mills for about as long as African Americans have. The discrimination against the Mexican nationality workers has also been fierce.

## At One Chicago Mill...

Knowing something about the situation in at least one steel mill in the Chicago area, I can state beyond a shadow of a doubt that racism and racial discrimination have not disappeared from the steel industry. According to reports that I have heard, African Americans were not even hired at this particular mill until the '60s. In that period when African Americans were first hired, "shit fights" used to break out on the floor between African Americans and whites. By the late '70s there were many African Americans working at this mill, but they were concentrated in certain departments. Of course these were departments with nastier working conditions, lower average incentive pay, or both. The seniority rules worked and still work so that you accumulate seniority not just plant wide, but in your department and within your section of your department. Technically African Americans were free to bid on any openings that were posted plant-wide just like anybody else. However, the only way to get into a different department was to start over at the bottom level jobs and then wait until you had enough department and section seniority to move up. So in fact there is a strong force keeping most workers in the same section and department they started in.

A few years ago when the company built a whole new section of the plant and prepared to close down two old departments, everyone working in the plant at that time had an opportunity to bid on these new jobs. However, the company established a very rigorous set of tests that all applicants for these new jobs had to pass in order to be considered. Once you passed all these tests seniority was the only factor in who got the jobs. However, somehow or other this new department has ended up with fewer minority workers than the plant as a whole.

I think that this just illustrates the point that racial discrimination has become much more subtle and slippery to fight. There are no explicit rules stating that African Americans can not have certain jobs. Even in the most desirable and highest paying job classifications there are a few minority workers. It is just that the vast majority of African American and other minority workers are still stuck in the least desirable, dirtiest, most dangerous, and least well-paid jobs.

Within the steelworkers union appearances, at least, have changed quite a bit. An African American staff worker for the international appears in the video. A number of African Americans have held high positions at the international level. Openly racist talk is not accepted from union officials at the local or higher levels. Blacks have been elected presidents of large and small locals. But, in one local that I know, there is a big gulf of mistrust between cliques or factions, or whatever you want to call them, of white workers and African American workers. Some white union officials attribute racist motives to every complaint or question by black workers. Some black workers automatically conclude that racist motives are behind every move of white union leaders they oppose. For example, elections were held a year ago for local union officers. In the election for recording secretary, the two highest candidates were separated by one disputed ballot. If you counted this ballot, the white candidate won. If you didn't count it, the race was a tie between the white candidate and the African American. When this matter was voted on in a local union meeting, the vote split almost entirely on racial lines.

The legacy of past racist actions by union officials is something that cannot be overcome easily. African American steelworkers have lots of justification for their suspicions. And, of course, when white workers or union officials take the attitude that says that all the issues of racial discrimination are in the past, this just makes matters worse.

### **The Courts and Legal Struggle**

Another whole issue in the fight against racial discrimination is how to relate to the courts and the laws. The video gives a central role to the struggle in the courts which resulted in the first and second Consent Decrees. It does mention that there were groups of activist African American workers fighting racism in the mills, but we don't learn much about them. My assumption would be that it was pressure from the anti-racist struggle in American society in general along with various manifestations of struggle among the masses of African American steelworkers which forced the Consent Decree into existence. Furthermore I would conclude that the Consent Decree was designed to stop the anti-racist struggle part way. It seems clear that the mass dissatisfaction of African American steelworkers with the first Consent Decree made the second Consent Decree necessary.

### **Mass Struggle is Key**

All through my years in the Marxist-Leninist Party we always maintained that the struggle of the masses was the key to forcing any social reform. I see no reason to think this struggle is any different. The federal government may have laws against the most blatant forms of racial discrimination, but the Clinton administration as well as the administrations before him have been retreating step by step from any actions to oppose the actual forms racial discrimination takes these days. The Republicans want to do away with all forms of "Affirmative Action" and Clinton is collaborating with this attack while publicly stating his support for some form of "Affirmative Action". Masses of steelworkers (as well as masses of all other sections of the working people) need to be mobilized to fight the backward trend towards increasing racial oppression.

Within the steel mills I think a fight needs to be waged for the steel companies to fund programs to upgrade the basic skills of current employees to the levels needed for the new higher tech jobs. Furthermore, the conditions of the bad jobs need to be fought over. Yes there is inherent danger in steel mill work, and environmental conditions can be downright nasty. However, the knowledge and the technical means exist to control and greatly reduce the hazards and to protect workers from the environmental problems. There is also no excuse for management styles which degrade workers' dignity. The steel companies need to be forced to keep track of what percentage of job upgrades are going to minority steelworkers. Imbalances in this percentage indicates that some sort of remedial action is called for. The testing standards need to be looked at to prove whether they are appropriate for the job. Opportunity must be provided to allow all steelworkers the chance to upgrade their skills and to advance.

Of course, racial oppression will not be eliminated solely by working within the steel mills. It infects this whole society and it will take a revolution to get rid of it. Certainly steelworkers have a role to play in changing the whole social and economic system as well as changing the conditions in the steel mills. By struggling against all the forms of racial oppression, discrimination and ideology, steelworkers will be changing themselves while they are changing society. ◊