

From Ideological Tendency to Political Party of the Working Class, 1972 excerpt

We are now going through the difficult process of making the necessary transition from a tendency to a political party. There is a profound and fundamental difference between a mere ideological and political tendency and a party.

What is the difference?

A tendency is basically concerned with propagating, promoting and shaping a political and ideological world outlook. It does not necessarily aim at winning large masses of adherents into a formal political organization. In fact, it may not be able to do so. This could be due to the unfavorable political situation. The objective situation may not have ripened sufficiently to attract large masses of people.

Moreover, the struggle against other ideological tendencies requires time to secure and fortify its revolutionary world outlook. In turn, this may only be possible on the basis of testing the program in the crucible of world events. This again may require a more or less extended period.

When Marx and Engels wrote the celebrated Manifesto, it was called the Manifesto of the Communist Party. But the actual organization (aside from the embryonic Communist League) took several decades to be firmly established, and above all in Germany where it became the party of the working class and in a general way adhered to the principles enunciated by Marx and Engels.

Marx and Engels lived for many years in exile in Britain. They did not attempt to develop a political party of the working class on the basis of Marxist principles. The objective situation there did not lend itself to the organization of the British workers into such a working class party. Marx and Engels were at the time mostly concerned with developing their revolutionary world outlook on the basis of the class struggle and the materialist conception of history.

Of course, wherever Marx really got the opportunity to influence the British workers movement, he quickly seized it. Examples of this are Marx's mobilization of the British working class to support the North during the Civil War. At the time the British ruling class was propagandizing for the slavocracy, and spreading lies that the victory of the North would deprive British workers of jobs because a victory of the North would close the South's markets to British goods.

But by and large, Marxism was only a tendency in Britain. Where Marxism really took hold of wide masses was in Germany and in France, where working class parties in a general way, adhered to Marxist conceptions.

A political tendency is an embryo party

To become a party it must go through a torturous, sometimes painful process of development. Under no circumstances can a political tendency seeking to revive revolutionary Marxism-Leninism become a party of the working class unless it acquires, in the course of the transition to a party, a considerable amount of practical political experience in the class struggle. Moreover, it must continually fight a battle to make its class composition correspond to its revolutionary class program.

A political tendency can easily become aborted (as indeed many have) by pretending to be a political party. A political tendency has all the political ingredients necessary for the formation of a political party but they are undeveloped and it lacks both the internal structure and the exterior armor necessary for it to engage in revolutionary class warfare. A party, of course, differs from a political

tendency in that the former has developed a formal structure whereas the latter is characterized by loose, more or less tenuous, organizational ties. This is so because a political tendency seeks first and foremost an identity of political position on its world outlook. Organizational form and character of structure become of considerable importance only after a period in which the basic political and theoretical conceptions have had sufficient time and experience to be tested.

A political tendency cannot make a transition to a political party unless it has accumulated within it a sufficient number of mature and tested cadres. Merely sharing a common world outlook, while indispensable for the formation of a political tendency, is inadequate unless it is accompanied by sharing common experiences in the struggle and sharing a common evaluation of the most critical and important struggles both the tendency and the movement have experienced.

The transition from an ideological tendency to a party also implies that the fundamental political principles of the tendency are firmly established in its literature which, in reality, constitutes the program of the party.

If one carefully reads over our literature, particularly the literature which evaluates the principal events and struggles of the decade, he or she will surely find that therein lies the programmatic basis for the formation of the party. No matter how well thought out a revolutionary program may be, or how accurately it depicts the nature of the driving forces of capitalist society and vigorously urges the overthrow of the capitalist system, it will become mere empty rhetoric unless it is geared to and engages in the struggle of the working class and oppressed people. Without struggle, without every-day participation in every possible form of class conflict no matter how small, dull, routine, or grandiose, the party of the working class will not become a reality. Struggles are the very essence of a revolutionary party.

Marx himself, said Engels, was above all, a fighter. Without the element of fight, propaganda for a socialist society is an academic exercise. (Of what good are people who can be agreeable with you on all political points, but who show no inclination whatever to struggle, to fight for them?)

This is illustrated by our own history. When we commenced our existence as an independent political organization, we were faced with a multitude of what appeared to be utterly insuperable obstacles.

When we started in March 1959, we had barely half a dozen people in New York. Our sole support outside of New York was the Buffalo and Youngstown branches. Aside from the diminutive size of the organization in New York, the most formidable obstacle lay in the character of the political trend at the time.

We attracted any number of people who expressed interest, and some complete solidarity, in ideas, in world outlook, but there was no struggle trend. The more we gave our time and energy to discussing and arguing with the variety of newcomers and visitors, both Black and white, it remained just talk.

Most of them were so deeply influenced by the witch hunt. They also had their sights set mostly on events in the Soviet Union and in China, and had a very dim outlook on the prospect of struggle in the United States.

The type of people we were attracting were representative of the current mood in the radical movement which was non-struggle. What we wanted most was to demonstrate that our ideological conceptions can only be tested in the struggle but struggle was not what the current trend was concerned with.

It was only after the Cuban Revolution and the momentous development of the Black liberation struggle that a tendency toward struggle on the part of the youth became manifest. This enabled our political tendency to grow and develop.

It should be noted that during the entire period of our early existence, we paid the closest attention and gave our utmost assistance to those in the Civil Rights and the Black and Puerto Rican liberation struggles, above all to Mae Mallory, Rob Williams, RAM, who at the time, were leading the struggle, and later of course to the Panthers.

Moreover, the degeneration of the CP, the SWP, the Sino-Soviet conflict, produced skepticism toward Marxist tendencies in general. This made it all the more necessary to select our friends and adherents on the basis of their activities in the struggle. This became easier as the objective situation changed, and a fighting, activist trend among the youth, Black and white, emerged.

It became clear that the basic differentiation between us and the SWP, CP and PL, was that we were also able to attract some of the best and the most serious cadre we now have in the party. The struggle of the sixties served to confirm our tactics and our strategy as well as our political principles as revolutionary Marxists.

The entire period of the '60s, and all of our participation in the struggles that took place in that decade, were truly object lessons of our principled politics.

All this leads us to a consideration of whether our organization is now sufficiently prepared and has the readiness and capability of making the transition from a political tendency to a party.

Implementing the Party's Position on the National Question and the Struggle to Make the Party a Truly Multi-National Organization

The acid test for a revolutionary workers Party is its position on the national question. For many years, really for centuries, it has been denied by the ruling class and its ideologists, educators, priests and politicians, that there has existed a national question in the United States . They have also denied the existence of racial and national oppression. Even the most progressive political tendencies have merely confined themselves to the struggle for civil rights and against racial inequality.

The earliest recognition, so far as whites are concerned, of the oppression and super-exploitation of Black, Puerto Rican, Chicano, and Native American, as the oppression of national minorities, came as a result of the teaching of Lenin, which became widely known in the United States only after the October Revolution. Just its mere recognition as a theoretical and political truth, was an advance over those who merely confined the struggle of national minorities in this country to the civil rights arena.

The consistent pursuit of the Leninist position on Black or Puerto Rican or Chicano oppression, as including the right of self-determination, was hindered by the early shift in the principled position of the CP in this country following the death of Lenin and the subsequent assumption of power for such a protracted period by Stalin.

In the few years in which the CP in this country was still, in a general way, guided by Leninist principles, it was unable, in view of the backwardness of the working class generally and the overwhelming prevalence of racism in all layers of the white population, to implement or perfect a principled position on self-determination. Also, the Party was new and relatively inexperienced and profoundly removed from the political and theoretical arena in which the Leninist polemics on the national question and the right to self-determination for oppressed nations was fought out on the vast arena of pre-October Russia .

The subsequent decay of the CP, as a result of false policies, caused that party to embark on a zigzag course in relation to the Black struggle in America from which it has never been able to recover. Notwithstanding all this, the CP was the only political party which fought on behalf of the Black people, however erroneous its line may have been. By comparison with any bourgeois or social-democratic organization it stood head and shoulders above them all, and it is no wonder that it was able to attract to its organization some of the best Black cadres in the country.

It can be said without any fear of exaggeration that whenever the CP made a turn to the right, it almost always dropped the slogan of self-determination and ceased to regard the Black people as a nation. Whenever, however, it made a left turn, it almost invariably again raised the question of self-determination -- sometimes including the slogan of a Black republic in the South in the Black Belt. At no time, however, has it been able to consistently promote the Leninist principled position of the right of nations to self-determination while at the same time continuing a consistent struggle to unite Black and white workers in the struggle against capitalism.

Throughout the late forties and especially during the fifties the CP had a thoroughly anti-Leninist position on the right of self-determination, denial of the existence of the Black people as a nation, along with a class collaborationist line of support for the Democratic Party. It zigzagged again during the sixties but was violent in its attacks on the development of militant Black organizations such as the Panthers, RAM, Robert Williams and Mae Mallory. It was very hostile to the Muslim organization and particularly Malcolm X for basically reactionary reasons. They were attacked simply because they wanted an independent Black organization and had a perspective of an independent Black state. It was not the class line of these organizations that they opposed at all, but their perspective of a separate state, which they have a right to promote as an exercise of self-determination.

The tremendous upsurge of the Black and other nationalities in the sixties carried with it also a wave of nationalism. It can be said with very little qualification that most of the radical organizations were very hostile to this very great progressive development. The radical organizations, such as PL (SWP, and the CP with certain limitations) instead of focusing on the positive side of the development, sought on the contrary to concentrate their attack, in most cases in a virulent manner, on what were some of the obvious shortcomings, errors, and just plain lack of definite political program, particularly the lack of any working class perspective.

Practically the entire period of the sixties, we spent defending the right of self-determination for the Black people and other minorities. This consumed our energies for such a long time precisely because we were in a virtual constant state of polemical struggle with the other political tendencies who generally denied the character of the Black liberation struggle as arising from national oppression. Most often they went back to the time-honored practice of reducing it to the mere question of racial discrimination.

The classic case in the United States in the recent period which showed the bankruptcy of their positions was the support given by these organizations to the racist strike of the UFT (teachers) in New York. PL and the CP came out against community control and refused to recognize the strike as racist in character. The CP later backed off, but PL, and organizations like Workers League, Labor Committee, Spartacist and all the social democratic organizations, supported Shanker (head of the NY UFT) in this shameless strike. The SWP came out against the strike.

Achieving a Multi-National Party

This background is important towards an understanding of what our problems as a Party are in connection with our effort to implement the Party's perspective of building a multi-national organization while not surrendering an iota on the principled question of self-determination.

It is instructive to recall what we said in our documents for our last Party conference (1971):

"Is there an inherent contradiction between the right of nations to self-determination and the building of a united working class Party to attract to itself workers of all nationalities from the oppressing nations as well as from the oppressed nations? The answer," we said, "is NO!"

"The need of the workers to organize themselves into a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist party and to unite them in the struggle against capitalism is an indispensable necessity for a victorious proletarian revolution.

"There are many who deny the need for a Marxist-Leninist Party altogether, and with them we have no quarrel because we are going right on building one, since we know of no successful socialist revolution that occurred without one, with the possible exception of Cuba , which can be explained.

"There are others however, who say that each nation within the confines of the U.S. should build their own Party and that since the workers of the oppressing nation and the workers of the oppressed nation have different problems arising from the nature of oppression, it is impossible, at least for now, to have a single, united Party.

"The logical conclusion of this thinking is that the whites should have one organization, Blacks another, Puerto Ricans another, etc. Assume that political revolution in this country favored such a development, the result then would be that we would have several Marxist-Leninist organizations. And if each had a generally Marxist-Leninist program, it would evolve from a loose alliance of these Marxist-Leninist organizations into a federation and finally into a unified multi-national political Party.

"In the final analysis, if workers are developing revolutionary Marxist-Leninist ideology, it implies proletarian internationalism and class solidarity in the struggle against imperialism. Once the basic assumption is made for the need of all workers to have a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist Party, the idea that the vanguard elements of all nationalities must unite in a common organization must be seen as the logical outcome, and as an urgent necessity.

"Those who would deny the need of all the workers to unite in a common political organization for the overthrow of the oppressive imperialist system, in reality deny the right to revolution."

"...To carry out this task effectively, we must strive to make our Party a multi-national organization, drawing workers from all nationalities..."

"Our party has consistently advocated self-determination under difficult circumstances and has given the liberation struggle its utmost support."

In order to make a transition from a mere political tendency to a political party of the working class, we must put, at the very top of our priorities, a persistent, determined and unrelenting campaign to attract to the Party the largest possible number of Black, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Native American and Asian workers, women, men, and youth. In the past period, most of our work, so far as the Black and Latin workers are concerned, were, of necessity, largely supporting activities in the struggle conducted by liberation groups that were fighting political persecution by the capitalist state; or merely fighting for their right to an independent existence, and faced by frame-ups and repression.

A look at the past record of the Party will make abundantly clear how numerous and varied our activities have been to support the struggle of a variety of liberation groups including, of course, the Panthers, the Lords, and others.

But our Party has to, in the interests of the liberation struggle and the working class struggle generally, devote more time and energy to the task of winning workers from oppressed nationalities into the Party.

There are periods when the task of attracting Black and Third World people is easier than at other times. It was most difficult during the period of the Sixties.

This was characterized by a strong wave of nationalism. Also, our Party was numerically small. However we have grown considerably larger and should, by that alone, offer more possibilities for getting into our ranks Black and Third World workers. The more we perfect our program and the more we try to develop economic issues, the more we will gain the ear of the oppressed people in the community.

We learned from the Job Fair experiences which the ASU led together with veterans, how overwhelming is the number of unemployed Black and Third World youth in relation to the whites. More than 90 percent were Black and Puerto Rican.

We learned further that we could not adequately prepare for the Veteran's March without winning a considerable number of Black and Third World veterans into the ASU. This was again dramatically illustrated by the Chicago and New York Job Fairs, where the support and composition of the demonstration was about 90 percent Black and Latin. We still have too few Black and Third World cadres to carry through the Veterans March.

There are other areas where we took the initiative and which again demonstrated the same overwhelming number of Black and Puerto Rican people and that we have much too small a number of Black and Third World comrades from the Party to adequately prepare the ground for the launching of such an important economic struggle.

A fundamental turn must be made so as to enable all to realize that a principal task of the Party lies in educating, particularly the white comrades, on how to win the confidence of Black and Third World workers and how to hold their interests in the Party at a time when their number in the Party is still small.

The greatest amount of energy, thinking, and above all, sensitivity, in how to relate to Black and Third World comrades and prospective Party members must be given. Nothing, absolutely nothing, should stay in the way of executing this all-important task.

Gay Oppression

The oppression of national minorities is not the only oppression meted out by a divisive ruling class. There is also the oppression, or rather, extra-oppression, of women, of youth and of gay people.

The degeneration of monopoly capitalism into state monopoly capitalism carries to an extreme all the forms of oppression which the capitalist system, in the previous epoch, had engendered and developed.

As the crisis of the social system becomes more and more apparent, the need of the ruling class to unload its burden on the most oppressed sections of society becomes more evident.

Only by dividing, only by fragmenting and continually pitting different elements of the oppressed masses against each other, can the capitalist establishment maintain its sway over all society, and hope to survive.

It is however the same sharpening of the persecution and oppression, the same divisiveness and fragmentation of the specially oppressed people in society, that have awakened them to struggle, and brought about a genuinely progressive militancy and resurgence of Black and Brown people, women, youth and gay people.

There is however a striking difference in the character of the support which has been given by the progressive movement generally to the oppressed nationalities, women and youth as contrasted with the limited support to gay people. A great deal of this can be explained by the fact that the prejudice may even be more deep seated and more profound than in the other cases. Much of it emanates from the religious bigotry of the Middle Ages and little has been done to combat it. On the contrary, it has been reinforced by the entire course of capitalist development.

Some attribute the limited measure of support and sympathy to what they say is the numerically small segment of the population that gay people constitute. This, however, is highly disputable even by such an authoritative figure as Kinsey.

It is particularly significant that the public change in attitude -- such as it is -- comes on the heels of a very formidable wave of struggle by gay people, a veritable "coming-out" in a most demonstrative way. Gay Pride took a cue from Black Pride.

Without the launching of the women's struggle, Freud's reactionary theory concerning the inferiority of women might still be the prevailing conception. Without the momentous liberation struggles launched in the '60s, the racist ideology of Oswald Spengler and his American disciples would still be taught openly, unabashedly and unashamedly. Without the struggle launched by gay people, the prejudices which have been ground into the consciousness of the masses by indoctrination would not even have been challenged let alone shaken to its foundations.

All this shows how intimate is the connection between the ideas of a particular time -- even progressive ideas -- and the conditions of the time, in this case, the state of the struggle.

Communist Form of Organization

The convention or congress is the highest or supreme governing body of a proletarian Party. It elects a national committee which acts between conventions or congresses of the Party. It is distinguished from a bourgeois or social-democratic convention in that decisions made by the convention are fully binding on all members of the party and failure to abide by the decisions is considered a violation of discipline

Not so in a bourgeois or social-democratic form of organization. You just have to look at the recent convention of the Democratic Party. The only decision that has any significance are the nominations for president and vice-president and even that is not considered binding. It is a rare case where bolting from the party to vote for another candidate or to abstain is penalized.

In social-democratic organizations decisions of the convention are also disregarded at will and it is just as rare for a national committee to take disciplinary action against members or groups who violate the national decisions. Caucuses and factions continue to operate openly and publicly in disregard of any decisions the convention may have made.

The concept of democratic centralism means the subordination of the minority to the majority. It means all lower party organizations submit to the discipline of the higher Party organizations and that all Party organizations are under the discipline of the national committee which in turn is responsible to the convention or congress.

On a branch basis, the highest governing body in the branch is the branch membership meeting. The leading committee of the branch or the executive committee is responsible to the general membership meeting. Decisions made by the leading committee in between membership meetings are binding on the membership. The leading committees of the branch are generally elected by the branch. In the larger cities it is possible to have several branches which in turn elect a city-wide committee which is responsible to the city membership as a whole.

Depending upon the size of the party, it is possible to have any number of factory, mine, mill, and district committees covering large production units or even industries in a special locality. All are under the jurisdiction of the constituted district, city, or state body of the party. No organization of the Party acts autonomously. This is particularly important where there are units of the Party in a mass organization, or where there are units of the Party which are attempting to build a mass organization although there may be only a few non-party people within its ranks.

All leading bodies of the Party and all levels of leadership ordinarily are established by the elective method where that is possible and practical. Before a convention or congress of the Party it is generally necessary to have a period of internal discussion regarding matters to be taken up at the

convention. It is generally considered a breach of discipline to discuss matters of an internal character outside the Party.

Those are some of the basic characteristics of a communist form of Party organization. There are many others. They vary from time to time depending upon circumstance and changing conditions. The more developed the Party, the more numerous the membership, the easier it is for it to make timely changes in its structure. A constitution which sets forth the basic rules governing the Party and its membership is a desirable and frequently indispensable need for Party organization and procedure. The constitution generally is adopted by the convention after a previous convention has appointed a committee to prepare a constitution. Amendments to the constitution are made only at conventions.

As any member of the Party who has been in the organization for a period of time knows, our Party is not yet a Party in the full sense of the word. As we said earlier, we have been an ideological and political tendency. We are now trying to make the transition to becoming the Party of the working class.

Our Party, for instance, has held regular, annual conferences, but not a convention. A convention is a delegated body. Its delegates are elected in certain proportions to the membership of each branch. Our conference in fact has been a nation-wide conference of the Party membership. Moreover, not all at the conference are members, but only friends. If we made it a delegated body, it would be small indeed. The conference has elected and added to the membership of the National Committee of the Party.

In the branches of the Party generally, the leadership has developed spontaneously or by consensus. Furthermore, even the largest branch, the New York branch, is only now in the last stages of having developed a formal leadership. (There are now three branches in New York City, called sections, each with its own steering committee and a City Committee that is responsible for the basic function of the city organization.)

For the first time, there has been established a division of labor in the national leadership between the City functions and the National functions. It was not too long ago that the leading national comrades were wholly in charge of city functions. But we now have a National Staff as well as a City Staff and that in itself is a big step forward, which also indicates the growth of the Party.

In Engels' famous address at the funeral of Karl Marx where he summarizes the contribution of Marx -- "Just as Darwin discovered the law of evolution in organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of evolution in human history." -- Engels then makes this pertinent observation: "He [Marx] discovered the simple fact (heretofore hidden beneath ideological excrescences), that human beings must have food and drink, clothing and shelter, first of all, before they can interest themselves in politics, science, art, religion, and the like."

What Engels is saying in the second part of the sentence is that there must at least have accrued a certain minimum requirement in the struggle for existence before other, more complex, tasks can be undertaken. This especially applies to our organization. It first of all needed the implements to establish itself as a tendency in the political struggle before it could take on the tasks of a full fledged party.

Before we could possibly undertake the tasks of a 16-page paper of Workers World, we first had to make sure that we could issue a four-page paper on a regular basis. Before we could have a national headquarters, we had to make strenuous efforts to maintain a mere office for all the organization's work. In fact, everyone who knows the development of our organization knows that it has been steadily and consistently growing but only because it has not sought to falsely hold itself out as a full fledged Party when in reality it had not yet reached that stage.

Everyone in the organization, however, is cognizant of the fact that we are developing, slowly but surely, a national structure that is commensurate with the growth of the organization and this will surely help us become the Leninist Party of the American working class.