

For Class Struggle Against Imperialist Aggression! **Communist Tactics and the Antiwar Movement**

The domestic political situation in the United States weighs heavily in the calculations of the imperialist chieftains as they prepare to unleash mass destruction on the people of Iraq. The White House has so far managed to keep a majority “on side,” but the support is very shallow, and is shrinking. Many black, Hispanic and white working people do not like the idea of going to war for Big Oil.

The war that the U.S. government is preparing to launch against Iraq is one in which American workers, and the oppressed and exploited of the whole world, have a side. The blockade of Iraq is, in itself, an act of war. Socialists must do everything possible to defend Iraq and defeat the aggressive designs of “our own” government.

On the campuses there is already widespread opposition to Bush’s aggression against Iraq. A teach-in at Berkeley on 14 September attracted some 1500 students. Besides a section of isolationist conservatives represented by right-wing ideologue Pat Buchanan, most of those who oppose the war preparations are those identified with the radical-liberal left: “solidarity” activists, black community representatives, feminists, peaceniks, liberal clerics and ostensible socialists. Yet, if popular support for war falls further, a “dovish” wing of the Democrats will doubtless emerge.

Lessons of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement

The reformist left anticipates just such a development and consciously aims to recreate the popular-frontist anti-Vietnam war movement of the 1960s. This movement was dominated organizationally by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), but subordinated politically to the liberal imperialists of the Democratic Party by the SWP’s insistence that the antiwar movement be limited to the “single issue” of U.S. Troops “Out Now!” There is nothing wrong in uniting with other organizations around a single common-denominator demand, but revolutionaries in such a united front cannot limit themselves to the minimal common political basis of unity. In setting the political limit in its antiwar front groups with the demand for American withdrawal, the SWP consciously ruled out any expression of Marxist, class-struggle politics.

As the war dragged on, a substantial section of the U.S. bourgeoisie came to believe that they should cut their losses and get out of Vietnam. The National Peace Action Coalition (NPAC) gathered considerable resources and built massive peace marches featuring Democratic Party doves like Bella Abzug and Vance Hartke. Every NPAC march featured preachers, labor

bureaucrats and liberal dignitaries who droned on endlessly about the need for “peace.” Keeping this “broad mass movement” intact meant ensuring that no discordant anti-imperialist speakers got close to the microphones.

Under the guise of building a “single issue” movement, the SWP excluded all attempts to connect the Vietnam war with the need for revolutionary struggle against U.S. imperialism. The liberal politics of NPAC also dictated the *form* of protest—the SWP was positively hostile to suggestions for work stoppages and all other class-struggle tactics. By politically policing the hundreds of thousands of radical youth and disaffected workers who came to oppose the imperialist war, the SWP helped ensure that the protests never spilled over to challenge the racist and anti-working class domestic policies of the American rulers. By limiting the politics of the movement to the requirements of the liberal wing of the capitalists, the SWP effectively aborted the opportunity for the development of a *class-conscious* current within the American working class that could oppose imperialist militarism at its roots. When U.S. troops were finally pulled out, the antiwar movement evaporated.

WWP/SA: Competing Pop-Frontist Coalition Builders

The same questions about how Marxists should organize against imperialist war that were posed 25 years ago at the beginning of the Vietnam antiwar movement are again raised by the unfolding Gulf crisis. In the San Francisco Bay Area, the Bolshevik Tendency (BT) has attempted to intervene in recent antiwar mobilizations on the basis of a consistent revolutionary Marxist perspective.

There are two main antiwar coalitions in the Bay Area, each dominated by an ostensibly socialist organization. The “Emergency Committee to Stop the U.S. War in the Middle East” (ECSUSWME) was initiated by the crypto-Stalinist reformists of the Workers World Party (WWP). The BT attended several ECSUSWME planning meetings and proposed that the coalition be open to all organizations opposed to U.S. aggression in the Gulf. We also argued that all participants should be allowed to express their points of view at events. Our comrades advanced two slogans as a political basis of unity: “No War for Big Oil/U.S. Out of the Middle East!” and “No U.S. Intervention in the Middle East!”

At the 22 August “Emergency Committee” meeting, BT comrades argued for this approach, and proposed to drop the slogan “Money for Human Needs, Not War,” from the committee’s program because it amounts to

calling for the “progressive” wing of the U.S. capitalists (i.e., the Democrats) to reform the imperialist system. Of course, this is why the demand appeared in the first place—to keep the door open for the Democrats or their surrogates. The unwritten rule of popular-frontist formations is that no one can present a Marxist analysis of the contradictions of imperialism, or the necessity for revolutionary struggle, because this would “alienate” people still in the liberal-Democratic camp. The BT proposal generated considerable discussion, and was narrowly defeated. But the WWP had a majority, and so the ECSUSWME remained a popular-frontist propaganda bloc based on a reformist/utopian program.

After losing this critical vote, which confirmed the popular-frontist character of the ECSUSWME, the BT comrades sat through the rest of the meeting as non-voting observers. A subsequent leaflet by a couple of sloppy centrists, who style themselves the Revolutionary Trotskyist Tendency (RTT), erroneously stated that the BT “claims to be in the left wing of the Committee,” and chastised us for not voting for one of the many RTT amendments put forward to give the coalition’s popular-frontist program a more leftist coloration.

The BT has also intervened in the other major coalition in the Bay Area, Socialist Action’s “Committee Against a Vietnam War in the Middle East” (CAVME). CAVME is organized around a single demand: “U.S. Out of the Middle East!” But Socialist Action (SA) proved no more open to the proposal to create a united front than the WWP. It is not just a matter of excluding revolutionaries. The SA reformists are so firmly committed to building a multi-class “single issue” antiwar movement based on liberal politics that they do not put forward their own speaker at CAVME events! True to their 1960s SWP heritage, SA measures the success of an event purely by how many people participate, rather than the politics that they are organized around. SA considered the teach-in at Berkeley on 14 September a huge success. A BT spokesperson who attended a 22 September CAVME meeting disagreed:

“We do not think the ‘teach-in’ on the 14th was a big success from a revolutionary perspective because out of the over 20 speakers, not one, *not one* put forward a revolutionary defeatist position; nor was a class-struggle perspective to end war put forward. In our opinion this amounts to an anti-communist exclusion of your left-wing opponents.”

Spartacist League: “Left-Wing” Abstentionism

There are times when possibilities for the intervention of revolutionaries are tightly restricted by the hegemony of the reformists within the movement. But right now the reformists are far from hegemonic, and most of the people prepared to demonstrate against U.S. intervention are open to considering different points of view. For example, the 22 September CAVME meeting attracted a hundred people, at least half of whom had no organizational affiliation. Several BTers were there, along with a dozen supporters of the Spartacist League (SL). Socialist Action was clearly worried about losing control of the meeting and seeing their front group turned into a united front that granted Marxists, like

everyone else, the right to put forward their views.

Unlike the BT, the Spartacist League did not try to contest the policies of SA; they were happy merely to denounce them. SLers at the meeting criticized CAVME because its program did not include a call for breaking the imperialist blockade of Iraq. Such a call would be perfectly appropriate for a united front against U.S. war provocations. Yet, instead of pushing to amend the basis of unity to include this demand, or supporting the BT’s efforts to “break the blockade” against Marxist politics in CAVME, the SL cited these as reasons not to be involved. This is not just tactical ineptness. The SL leadership has so little confidence in its members’ ability to function in a broader arena that even the most minor tactical moves or utterances must be dictated from the top. Sustained interaction with members of other leftist groups threatens the leadership’s organizational control of the rank-and-file. Thus the SL “intervention” amounted to a series of criticisms designed to cover its abdication from any serious fight for influence within the emerging antiwar movement.

That evening the SL held a sparsely attended public meeting to discuss the events in the Gulf. Commenting on the SL’s attitude, a BT speaker remarked:

“It’s easy to make ultimatums comrades, but it’s much harder to engage in political struggle to influence the periphery of the reformist left. If the antiwar movement is *a priori* left to the leadership of the Marcyites and Socialist Action, then it’s simply a self-fulfilling prophecy to say in advance that it will be dominated by the reformists.”

Our comrade also noted that the SL’s abstentionism contrasted sharply with its activities at the beginning of the movement against the war in Vietnam. The SL only broke with the Committee for Fifth Avenue Vietnam Peace Parade in 1965 when the committee insisted that participating organizations could not raise their own slogans on demonstrations. Before walking out, the SL attempted to reverse this anti-communist exclusionism. Two years later, on 24 October 1967, the SL Political Bureau discussed a plan to bloc with Stanley Aronowitz to intervene in the committee to make it a “bona fide united front,” in which there were “no restrictions on any group’s right to raise its own propaganda.”

It seems that our criticisms at the forum hit a nerve. The SL promptly responded with a polemic in the 5 October 1990 issue of *Workers Vanguard* (WV). Entitled “BT: Pimple on the Popular Front,” the article accused us of capitulating to liberal-Democratic critics of Bush’s Middle East war drive. As “evidence,” it pointed to a textual difference between two versions of a BT leaflet entitled “No United Nations Fig Leaf for U.S. Imperialism! U.S. Troops Out of the Middle East!” The 8 September version of the leaflet contains a condemnation of Daniel Ellsberg’s support of direct U.S. military intervention, which was omitted from the 29 September version. WV did not tell its readers that Ellsberg had publicly repudiated his call for unilateral U.S. intervention at the 14 September Berkeley teach-in (i.e., between the first and second version of our leaflet), and had joined other liberal notables in calling for a stronger UN role. No reasonable person could interpret this omission,

made solely for the sake of factual accuracy, as an attempt to soft-peddle our opposition to the liberals and the UN's role in the Middle East.

The Fire Last Time: Marines in Lebanon in 1983

The last time the U.S. military set foot in the Middle East, the SL exhibited a cowardly, social-patriotic reflex. In 1983, the U.S. was literally blown out of the region when a Muslim truck bomb devastated the Marine encampment in Beirut. The fearsome anti-imperialists of the SL, who a year earlier had denounced the Marines as "the world's most notorious imperialist butchers" with "the blood of millions of toilers on their hands," whose name was "synonymous with the bloody suppression of colonial revolt" (*WV*, 3 September 1982), suddenly began calling for saving the survivors of the attack. The External Tendency of the iSt (forerunner of the BT) sharply attacked the SL's social-patriotic call to get the Marines out "alive," and called instead for their removal from the Middle East "by any means necessary."

The destruction of the Marine barracks in October 1983 was a defensible act that drove the U.S. military out of Lebanon. It was the biggest defeat inflicted on U.S. imperialism since the war in Vietnam. Any supposedly revolutionary organization, particularly one based in the U.S., should welcome a similar outcome to the current intervention.

For Revolutionary Intervention in the Antiwar Movement!

The conclusion of the *WV* polemic quotes Joseph Seymour, the SL's leading theoretician: "There is no antiwar movement independently of an anti-capitalist movement." This is pure sectarian drivel. Does the SL now consider that there was no "antiwar movement" in the U.S. in the late 1960s? There was such a movement. The problem with it was that the SWP and the Stalinists managed to keep it "independent" from revolutionary Marxism, and the result was that thousands of activists were channelled into the dead-end of Democratic Party politics.

While it is true that any serious antiwar movement

must *ultimately* engage in struggle against the capitalist system that fosters and requires war, such movements are nearly always politically amorphous in their initial stages. This is a point that Lenin made in *Socialism and War*:

"The sentiments of the masses in favour of peace often express incipient protest, anger and consciousness of the reactionary character of the war. It is the duty of all Social-Democrats [i.e., Communists] to utilize these sentiments. They will take a most ardent part in every movement and in every demonstration on this ground; but they will not deceive the people....Whoever wants a lasting and democratic peace must be in favour of civil war against the governments and the bourgeoisie."

The task of revolutionaries is to intervene in antiwar movements to steer them, or at least their more radical wing, in an anti-capitalist direction. Writing off the incipient opposition to U.S. aggression in the Middle East because it is not revolutionary *from the start* effectively hands the antiwar movement over to the liberals and their leftist hangers-on.

When it was a Trotskyist group, the SL consciously avoided such sectarian stupidity. A document endorsed by James Robertson at the founding conference of the SL in 1966 outlined a very different approach to antiwar work from that pursued by the Spartacists today:

"The S.L. must not appear to allow the correctness of our program to breed an abstentionist attitude on our part. Our role is not to sit on the sidelines and lecture the anti-war movement while refusing to 'dirty our hands' in the day-to-day work of the movement; rather, the attractiveness of our program will be enhanced to the extent that we prove in practice the practicality of our ideas by vigorously putting them into practice. This does not mean that we do nothing but engage in simple 'Jimmy Higgins' work to 'prove ourselves' and eschew the necessary internal political confrontation within the anti-war arena. Rather we seek [to be] both the best activists and the most programmatically clear fighters against the war."

It is absurd for revolutionaries to stand aside because participants in the antiwar movement are taken in, to one extent or another, by the saccharine phrases of the reformists. The task of Marxists is to struggle to win workers and youth who oppose Bush's war drive against Iraq to struggle against the whole system of exploitation and piracy that lies at its root. ■