

Communist Work in the Trade Unions

We print below, followed by our own commentary, major excerpts of several documents sent to us last fall by the International Communist League (IKL) of Austria. The first document is a proposal written jointly by the IKL and the Group of Oppositional Workers (GOA) at the General Motors Austria Works, a group that IKL supporters participate in. The proposal was written for an international meeting of GM "rank and file" groups held in Amsterdam in September, 1984.

The second document, "Trade Union Resistance Struggle and Political Organization," is by the IKL alone. It explains the IKL's conception of its work as a communist organization in oppositional rank and file groups. Finally we print two paragraphs of self-description by the GOA, taken from its "Proposal for an Electoral Platform" distributed to General Motors workers and also submitted to the Amsterdam conference as a concretization of the ideas in the joint IKL/GOA document. (The translations of these documents are by the LRP; emphasis is as in the originals.)

The LRP commentary is a critique of the method of communist work in the trade unions illustrated by all three documents.

TO THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL MEETING OF GENERAL MOTORS RANK AND FILE GROUPS (A Joint Discussion Proposal by GOA and the IKL)

The Condition of the Automobile Industry

The automobile industry is one of the most important branches of industry in the imperialist world. In late 1979 it, like the whole capitalist system, was shaken by an all-out crisis. At first the weakest U.S. auto firms were affected; later (in 1980) many European producers were included too. In the meantime Chrysler had abandoned and sold all of its international production plants. The European buyer, Peugeot, however, was itself not in good shape; it too was floundering. It undertook a ruthless reorganization plan for Talbot. A similar treatment was given to British Leyland, and other producers also made constant staff reductions. Since the late 1970s more than 1.5 million auto workers worldwide have lost their jobs, despite the slight boom since 1982.

Within the automobile industry a relentless competitive struggle for survival is taking place. This struggle between firms is being carried out on the backs of the working class. It has resulted in mass unemployment, reduction of living standards and the pauperization of whole regions, especially in the third world.

The Japanese automobile industry is a threat to its European and North American competitors precisely because of its high technological level. So they try to catch up to Japan. This development necessarily

leads some firms which can't keep up with their rivals to fall out of the race. But this means more hundreds of thousands of auto workers without jobs.

The workers will not take this without a fight. A whole series of auto strikes proves this: for example, in Belgian Ford in 1968, supported by Ford workers in West Germany, Britain and the USA; or the British Ford strike in 1971 and the 1975 struggle of GM workers in Mexico (also with international support); likewise in 1977. In 1976 the Strasbourg [France] GM workers went on strike for three weeks; a year later there was a strike at Antwerp GM; and the latest example is the five-week, bitter strike of the French Talbot workers. These are only a few examples.

But most of the struggles ended in defeat. Although there was international financial and moral support in some cases, the struggles remained isolated and couldn't put up effective resistance against the bosses. This is reason enough to meet here.

What Are the GM Bosses' Goals?

In 1979 GM announced the biggest investment program ever undertaken by one company in the history of capitalism. From 1980 to 1984, 16 billion German marks [about \$6 billion] were invested, mainly in Western Europe, to construct new production plants and modernize old ones. Further, the company plans to invest 4.7 billion marks [about \$1.8 billion] more in Europe. This offensive is primarily aimed at pushing back its rival, Ford, in Europe.

Unlike Ford, which hitherto has had 44% of its sales in foreign countries, GM traditionally concentrated on the internal American market, which took 80% of its sales. Because of the advance of the Japanese and German auto industries in the late 1970s, competition on the American market became ever sharper, above all between Ford and GM. In the USA in 1980-81 Ford was seriously thrown back, and in 1982 it nearly faced a life-and-death crisis. GM was the victor in this battle and now wishes to seize Ford's last domain, Western Europe, through an enormous extension of production.

GM now wants to produce "world cars." This means that the international division of labor will move to a qualitatively new level. A more profitable cost-per-unit mass production is being sought via unification of planning and development as well as via standardization and rationalization of production. The only driving force is to achieve super-profits.

The reduction of the number of vehicle types and the international splitting up of engine, gear and component plants -- as well as of assembly locations and research centers -- raised the mutual interdependence of the various individual units. Simultaneously, this led in recent years to a progressive centralization of management. Already in 1974 GM had created a common planning center for the coordination of de-

velopment work for its five American branches. This strengthened centralization also made it possible for GM's management to play off the work force of one branch against another through computerized control to a previously unanticipated degree.

It is clear that nationally limited workers' struggles will be defeated with increasing ease. If, for example, a British auto plant is struck, it allows the identical type of car or at least its basic components to be imported from other production plants in other countries.

Today each investment is determined according to a firm's worldwide strategy, whereby the most profit-

more jobs are squeezing higher productivity out of us. Along with increasing physical and psychological exhaustion there is the decrease of our real wages. The rising cost of living, taxation and often credit rates depresses our standard of living. Working conditions of women are especially intolerable, from their even lower wages through chauvinistic hostility to sexual harassment. On top of this, after work they face the undivided burden of housework.

How to Organize Resistance

Even if we wish only to hold on to our present living standards, we must fight. Only workers' direct action (strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins, boycotts, building of strike and factory committees, etc.) can thwart the plans of the capitalist managers. Since the bosses are on the offensive we must first of all organize our defense. So how we do this is a question of our survival.

Our highest goal should be to organize a common struggle above all political differences, above all differences of race, sex, age, etc. National borders must be no barrier for us GM workers. If we are able to take steps in the direction of this sought-for workers' united front, that would be a greater success. What is decisive for us GM workers is to achieve the greatest possible mobilization for our immediate interests.

The preconditions for such a common struggle are, nevertheless, common goals. Our common immediate interests must be assembled in an international Action Program. This has to be worked out jointly by the groups participating in the GM Conference. In order to give a perspective for a common struggle which goes beyond our common immediate interests, political discussions are necessary. So we consider it to be the right and duty of each political current within the workers' movement to introduce its political views and proposals. In this way a comradely criticism of other currents could only be constructive.

All militant co-workers should join together around such an international Action Program. The success of even local conflicts depends increasingly on the international coordination of workers. Otherwise, one work force after another will be defeated, one workplace will be played against another, by GM's internationally alert management. Therefore we should take the first steps towards preventing the future isolation of individual workplaces. It is increasingly necessary to organize an international fighting trade union opposition around the international Action Program, so as to place it before all GM workers and win them to it.

Elements of an International Action Program

We believe that the following considerations and demands should be the main points for an international action program for the fightback at GM, since they deal with the immediately threatening dangers. It goes without saying that we regard these points



Spanish communist worker with homemade hammer and sickle. Workers must create a new vanguard, not a new rank and file.

able conditions of exploitation on the international level are used. This means, for example, locating labor intensive production in countries with a low wage level, above all the developing countries or the EEC's backyard (Turkey, Greece), while capital intensive production is situated in countries with correspondingly qualified work forces and lower strike rates. The mobility of capital allows relatively fast capital transfers, which means shifts of production over thousands of miles.

Jobs are being lost, speed-up on existing jobs is increasing, we are being more and more disciplined, breaks are too short for necessary rest, more and

only as the basis for discussion.

The first demand that we must raise is the security of existing jobs. Each additional job loss worsens the conditions of those still working and betters the position of the employer. We must therefore fight with all our force to prevent every planned layoff. If the necessary work has already been reduced by new machinery, the remaining work must be divided among all available workers. The boss must pay for all costs, especially the guarantee of the total former wage bill.

The second demand is also a current necessity: maintain and improve our wages. This goal also demands an all-out fight, since we can't win by begging and bureaucratic deals. In order to prevent a split of the working class, we support absolute, not proportional, wage demands. The capitalists' excuse that they face foreign competition must in no case be considered. Our standpoint is not competition among robber capitals but protection of living labor power.

Third: we must resolutely oppose all attempts by the bosses to intensify the exploitation of our labor power. Tougher control and discipline of the work force is management's open goal, in order always to achieve the optimal valuation of their capital. Our counter-struggle must be to set the goal of bringing working time and work organization under the control of the workers.

Why is a Militant Trade Union Opposition Necessary?

The necessary struggle against layoffs, for wage improvements, against electronic supervision and control, for equal rights for women workers, etc., is opposed nowadays in all countries by an extensive trade union apparatus separated from the rank and file. The bureaucratic leaders, functionaries and shop stewards largely tied to them have secured so many privileges and are willingly accepted as negotiation partners by management. In order to preserve their advantages they always seek more compromises with the companies; and in times of crisis this can only mean compromises at the expense of the workers!

These rotten compromises are then sold, often successfully, as the results of a struggle for the workers' interests. Indeed, the bureaucracy still often succeeds in holding the trust of significant parts of the working class.

We must take note of this fact. Since their power comes in good part from the thoroughgoing liquidation of union democracy, one of our most important demands must be the creation of union democracy within unified industrial unions and the introduction of democratic control by the rank and file over the shop stewards. This struggle for the democratization of the representation of the workers' interests will be successful only if the militant and revolutionary workers join together and form a fighting trade union opposition (UO). The UO must be an organized tendency within the traditional unions. It must make use of the pressure which the rank and file exerts on the

bureaucracy, intensify it and everywhere possible act in common with its steps toward struggle.

It would be wrong to withdraw from the fossilized unions without a struggle in order to fight sectarian "autonomous" fights, as long as the bureaucracy still retains the trust of the mass of workers and doesn't act in an openly reactionary way against the workers.

Along with this clear perspective for broad and collective struggles, the UO must, however, criticize mercilessly at every moment the inconsistency and halfheartedness of the old union leaders and shop stewards. During and even before each struggle, we must warn the workers that the class collaborationist attitude of the bureaucracy tends unavoidably to subordinate the interests of the workers to the profit interests of the capitalists. Only a self-conscious



Rome 1977: 100,000 strikers demand state aid. All roads lead to politics — reformist or revolutionary?

rank and file movement that is ready for action can prevent this.

We must make proposals to prevent this imminent betrayal through the independent organization of the workers. It is clear to us that the worker can win only if in the final analysis the old union leadership and the old shop stewards are ousted and replaced by leaders who unconditionally represent the workers' interests.

The struggle of the UO is thus aimed in no way at the trade unions but rather against the treacherous leaders. But as long as they retain wide support among the masses, we are forced to conclude agreements with them in order thereby to be able to include the workers they lead in a common front against capital. However, we always make clear that in the final analysis we fight for the union leadership.

In order to be able to clearly confront the national limitations of the traditional leaders, we must build the UO nationally and internationally. The

superiority of the UO will then also be shown by the fact that it is able to place factory problems in relation to the entire management strategy. Information on the situation in the other workplaces must first of all produce a consciousness over the significance of international contacts. It will be easier to show that this can be only a prelude to the international coordination of workers' actions.

A further goal of the UO must be to go beyond the realm of GM in the future and make contact with union oppositions in other automobile firms and finally include the whole field of the metal industry.

TRADE UNION RESISTANCE STRUGGLE AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION (The IKL's conception of its work in oppositional rank and file groups at GM)

As a small organized part of the Austrian vanguard we see it as our task to overcome the isolation and dispersion of the progressive and militant workers, which includes ourselves.

Because of the lack of a revolutionary pole in the form of a revolutionary party and international, the dispersion and partial disorientation of large parts of the working class is no accident but is causally determined. The leadership crisis of the proletariat means for us not simply the lack of a revolutionary organization, but at the same time the absence of a revolutionary program conforming to today's conditions.

If only a Revolutionary Communist Party were in position to consolidate fighting and revolutionary elements in the unions on a communist trade union program and take successful steps toward building an international, revolutionary tendency in the unions. Unfortunately we have not yet moved very far towards this goal of ours.

For us, the unity of theory and practice is no empty phrase. Without political practice, from the armchair only, apart from the class struggle -- a revolutionary program cannot be further worked out. On the other hand, practice which does not rest on any program, or which is not aimed toward building a revolutionary program today, is in the final analysis without orientation.

This explains why the IKL, as a Trotskyist organization, helped from the beginning to build up the Group of Oppositional Workers at GM/Austria and keep it alive. We seek to the best of our abilities to plan and carry out common work in all actions with the GOA.

Along with this practical common work, however, we see it as our most important task to further develop our political answers beyond the common understanding of the GOA and introduce them as revolutionary propaganda within the GOA and also in the factory.

As we have already made clear in the joint proposal of the GOA and the IKL, we consider it to be the right and the duty of every political current to

put forward their views on matters beyond the united action. We must not act as if we all had the same opinions. For this reason we would like to outline here, however briefly, our perspective in connection with the joint discussion proposal of the GOA and the IKL for the first international GM conference.

For us, the cause of the crisis lies in the ultimate fall of the rate of profit. Only the workers produce surplus-value. Since automation and rationalization of production put more and more pressure on the workers to produce more and more cars with fewer and fewer workers, the surplus-value contained in one car becomes less and less. Even if all cars were actually sold and their total surplus-value thereby realized, the rate of profit must necessarily drop in the long run. In addition, the automobile market of the imperialist countries is very quickly satiated. This has to further worsen the profit situation of the industry and further sharpen its competitive struggle.

The capitalists now seek to counter this falling tendency of the rate of profit. On the one hand, productivity and production are increased through enormous investment programs, in order to overtake competition in the short run. This leads for the most part to the decrease of the workforce. On the other hand, production costs are reduced through wage reductions and electronic supervision systems.

Through these measures, of course, the produced surplus-value does not increase. On the contrary, it falls. Still, those capitals which work with above average productivity can realize as their own profit surplus-value produced in other factories with below average productivity. This raises the competitive struggle, reduces the overall possibility of creating profits and thereby accelerates the tendency towards capitalist crisis.

If we want to achieve continuous success against the capitalist offensive that is under way, we must inseparably link all steps that we are already taking today with the perspective of breaking this profit-logic and transforming the economy according to our interests. One step in this direction is the struggle for the organization of factory committees and control commissions to fight for the right to inspect the company books and thereby smash business secrets.

This demand becomes especially acute when the company bosses move to mass factory shutdowns and layoffs. It will then be necessary to go further. Should the bosses explain that they can't maintain every job, we must demand their expropriation without compensation, the takeover of the factories as common property and the operation of production under workers' control.

Workers' control of production, as opposed to any form of co-determination, is the unavoidable consequence of every uncompromisingly led economic struggle. Thus it has a central place in our propaganda. More and more workers will recognize on the road to resistance struggles that they too must not shrink from a counteroffensive if they wish to defend their

interests seriously. Every economic struggle, however, becomes political at a certain point. Then the state and the government intervene, naturally on the side of the capitalists.

The slogan of control over production must not be separated from the question of arming the workers. First, strike pickets must be armed as required, and ultimately workers' militias against police and fascists will be a life and death question. The most recent experiences, for example in the British coal miners' strike, show this necessity with all clarity.

All revolutionary unionists must be fully understand that their struggle for the working class' necessities of life will sooner or later throw them up against the question of state power.

The goals of our struggle stated here represent for us a bridge meant to lead the struggle over the immediate daily interests of the workers to the final goals of the working class. We must therefore be prepared for the class struggle to contribute inevitably to this confrontation -- and we ought also to have an answer for it. According to all the teachings of history, this can only mean: rule by the working class, that is, the revolutionary seizure of power by the proletariat democratically organized in councils.

We must not shrink from the dimensions of this perspective. As well, in view of the present nearly hopeless situation, the feeling of powerlessness must not become triumphant. Every long march begins with the first step.

Already today, a consistent struggle for the vital interests of the workers requires international organization. The international opportunities of capital must become counterposed international opportunities of the workers. A vanguard role in this is being played by the workers of multinational firms. They are especially affected by international transfers of capital and can only defend themselves through an equally worldwide counter-strategy. The coordination of struggle actions across national boundaries is a necessary condition for any effective strategy against capital; national limitations in the union movement serve the bourgeoisie exclusively.

International workers' solidarity, however, is a powerful weapon of the workers against the bourgeoisie. With this meeting a step in this direction has already been taken. The question today is whether every possibility and necessity is clearly seen. Both should be expressed in our decisions:

*On the one hand, the goal of a fighting union opposition on an international scale, which bases itself on the principles of a workers' united front: unity in action against the class enemy; freedom of political counterposition in the workers' movement; the right to criticism and propaganda for all political currents of the workers' movement. March Separately, Strike Together!

*On the other hand, the first concrete steps in this direction with regard to the prevailing powers. We have outlined our relevant concrete conceptions in

the joint discussion proposal of the GOA and the IKL. We would like to advocate this political orientation at the first international conference of GM rank and file groups, and we seek thereby to convince the greatest possible number of colleagues of it. Moreover, we will strive to support all class struggle attempts at GM, as in the past, as well as possible.

In this sense we welcome the realization of this conference as a step in the right direction, and we wish it every success and fruitful discussions.

GOA: PROPOSAL FOR AN ELECTORAL PLATFORM

We are a group of co-workers with various political views who have come together to run in the coming shop steward elections. We see ourselves forced to take this step because the policies of the current stewards have meant constant retreats from the attacks of the company on our working conditions and standard of living. In the situation where the company can only strengthen its survival in the economic crisis at our expense, we, however, can improve our working and living conditions only if we undertake a serious resistance against the company. This requires shop stewards who act consistently in the interests of the workforce!

WHAT IS THE "SLATE FOR WORKFORCE DEMANDS"?

We are a non-partisan group of co-workers joined together on the basis of our electoral program. The members of the slate come from diverse political directions, and what unites us is the wish to have a union and shop stewards who stand consistently for the interests of the workforce. Our electoral program is, so to say, our least common denominator; but it is not a muzzle. Each of us may interpret this platform according to his own political opinion! And since we are not a united bloc, we have every freedom to criticize one another. We don't believe that we have found the key to ultimate wisdom with our platform, and we are therefore grateful for any suggestion on the part of our colleagues. Finally the most important thing: each of you is heartily invited to join the "Slate for Workforce Demands" and work with it. For every success!

LRP Reply

THE CENTRALITY OF THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

The documents written by the Austrian comrades attempt to deal with one of the most difficult problems faced by Marxists today in the advanced capitalist "West": How to convince militant workers of the validity of communist ideas, at a time when many workers in these countries, perhaps still a majority, retain their hopes for a return to the post-World War II period of prosperity in the imperialist countries.

The IKL and the GOA are aware that world capitalism is facing a serious crisis. Their documents suggest a view resembling our own, that the unique con-

junction of American hegemony and worldwide working-class defeats which created the post-war boom is over, and therefore that the boom cannot be repeated without an overwhelming offensive by capital against the proletariat. Indeed, in most of the advanced capitalist world, working class conditions have deteriorated markedly since the 1960s. Yet there is still a strong memory of the boom among workers, of a period when they made gains with relatively little resistance from the capitalists.

This is especially true in the U.S., where the prosperity lasted relatively long and started from the highest level, and in some countries like Austria, where Social Democratic governing parties built up a vast array of "social partnership" programs promising to secure the workers' interests through good times and bad. This left the workers ill prepared for the crisis the system has now entered. In the U.S., the trade union bureaucracy extended its strategy of class collaboration to the point where today, when profits are precarious, it seeks to avoid every confrontation. In Austria, Social-Democratic ex-Chancellor Bruno Kreisky's policy of "sublimation of the class struggle" also left the working class with a leadership addicted to betrayal.

It is the responsibility of Marxists -- the only reason for our organized existence -- to show our class the way forward in the class struggle, based on a scientific understanding of capitalist reality. The conditions just outlined make our task especially difficult but all the more necessary, if the working class is not to be totally taken by surprise when the all-out capitalist attack begins.

Communist work does not take place in a political vacuum. The post-war prosperity bubble gave birth to a vastly expanded middle class throughout the world, interpenetrated with the working class at one end of its spectrum in the form of a powerful labor aristocracy. These layers have immediate material interests in preserving their gains won under capitalism and therefore in preserving capitalism itself; they provided the basis for a historical re-strengthening of reformism.

The reformist resurgence made itself felt through political parties, Social Democratic and Stalinist, as well as through the labor bureaucracy at the economic level. In their day Lenin and Trotsky pointed out that the class struggle in the epoch of capitalist decay could be summed up as the fight for the leadership of the working class: the combat between revolutionaries and reformists. In our day the necessity for Bolsheviks to frame their work according to this principle has been redoubled by the fact that authentic communism was nearly eradicated during the post-war period.

Unity Plus Independence

The classical Bolshevik method for work in the class struggle is two-edged: on the one hand, a clear independent communist presence, both inside and out-

side the trade unions, fighting for our analysis and strategy; on the other, common struggles with militant workers despite the reformist ideas they still hold. Unity in action and absolute independence in political program have always been the hallmarks of Leninists.

The difference between communists and centrists, those vacillators who affirm Marxism in often sincere rhetoric but who trail at the heels of reformism in reality, is not over whether to work with the mass of reformist-minded workers but over how to do it. Centrists see reformism as a partial movement forward, a limited form of progressive politics, a blunted instrument that simply doesn't go far enough. Bolsheviks recognize reformism as counterrevolutionary and fight it as such. We work together with reformists in joint actions for even very limited demands; in such work communists attempt to prove through the conduct of the struggle that the reformist leaders, because they are committed above all to the preservation of capitalism, are in fact enemies of the working class, that they will not fight for the workers' needs when these come into sharp conflict with the capitalists' drive for profits.

The organizational vehicles for these common struggles are many and varied: caucuses, strike committees, mass meetings, etc. These are necessarily temporary, thrown up by the workers according to the special needs of their immediate struggles. Communists in the unions also need to be represented by distinct party fractions, sections of the revolutionary organization concentrating on particular groups of workers and intimately familiar with the details of their struggles. It is critical that the communist voice not be confused with the organs of the broader groups that the revolutionaries work with and within. Otherwise it gets blurred with that of the reformist leaders, and exposing the reformists' capitulations becomes impossible.

The Trotskyist Transitional Program

A central axis of communist work in the unions is the Transitional Program written by Leon Trotsky in the late 1930s. This program is based on the understanding that capitalism has entered its epoch of de-

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cay, so that the fight for socialism is on the agenda. The Transitional Program is not itself the socialist program of revolution, but rather a program for the trade unions and other mass workers' organizations. It takes the key demands of the workers to the highest level possible within the confines of capitalism and demands that the reformist working-class leaders carry out these demands despite the counter-interests of the capitalists. It is a weapon for confronting the reformist misleaders, exposing their betrayals of the class struggle and counterposing the alternative of the revolutionary party.

Doing away with the old division between the minimal (reform) program and the maximal (socialist) program, the Transitional Program is meant to serve as a bridge to move workers' from their current consciousness to the program of socialist revolution; it is therefore a substitute for the reform program. It joins together communists' work inside the trade unions and their revolutionary activity outside. In Trotsky's words, "The present epoch is distinguished not for the fact that it frees the revolutionary party from day-to-day work but because it permits this work to be carried on indissolubly with the actual tasks of the revolution."

The last thing that Trotsky was trying to accomplish with the Transitional Program was to blur the political line between revolutionary and reformist politics. He took great pains to make the distinction clear. For example, he labeled the key demand for the seizure of capitalist property "expropriation" so that no one would confuse it with the reformists' slogan of nationalization; he sought no agreement on wording to disguise a vital disagreement on content.

Decline of the Communist Tradition

Unfortunately the communist tradition of Lenin and Trotsky was severed by the Stalinist counterrevolution, World War II, the post-war defeats worldwide, and the temporary re-invigoration of capitalism that resulted — which shattered the international proletariat. The same middle-class explosion that bolstered reformism infested the ranks of the Fourth Internationalists and transformed them into the myriad varieties of centrists we see today. Largely driven out of the working class, they recruited more and more from the intelligentsia and over time abandoned the proletarian vantage point. A precious lesson of the past was lost: that intellectuals and students could provide valuable aid to the working-class vanguard on the condition that they broke decisively from the middle-class world view. Gradually, the perception that Bolshevism amounted to nothing more than middle-class radicalism shorn of its limitations -- pressed to its "logical" conclusion -- replaced the communist view that the two represent counterposed class positions.

When such centrists looked at the industrial working class they saw many who accepted capitalism and expected their well-being to come from within the sys-

tem rather than from revolution. Regarding themselves as outsiders, the centrists sought to win respect by "orienting towards the working class" -- entering the unions and becoming the most militant fighters for immediate demands. The frightening idea of revolution was safely tucked away into the safe realm of the distant future. As a consequence, there are groups claiming to be Marxist, Leninist and Trotskyist engaging in trade union practices that restore the old minimal/maximal approach of the reformists; their concentration on trade unionist struggles for immediate interests is relieved occasionally by Sunday sermons on the need for socialism. On the rare occasions when they advance the Transitional Program, they substitute it for the socialist program, not for the minimal program of reforms.

Today especially, when the traditional reformists offer so little struggle and so much pure capitulation, many leftists think it sufficient to counterpose a minimal program of reforms to the leaders of reformism themselves. Likewise, they offer not a vanguard leadership but a more militant reformist leadership. The rightward shift of reformism in today's crisis of capitalism exerts a powerful magnetic pull on the extreme left. As the post-war bubble collapsed and the material basis for the middle class began to radically contract, the old petty-bourgeois-led working-class parties accelerated their dissolution and the more left-leaning centrists rushed in to take up the slack. Unfortunately they will play a critical role in the class struggle, which means that the combat between centrists and authentic communists for proletarian leadership is especially crucial. Our need to use the Transitional Program as a tool for separating workers with reformist illusions from their misleaders becomes ever more important. Above all, it must be rescued from misuse by the centrists.

A "Least Common Denominator" Program

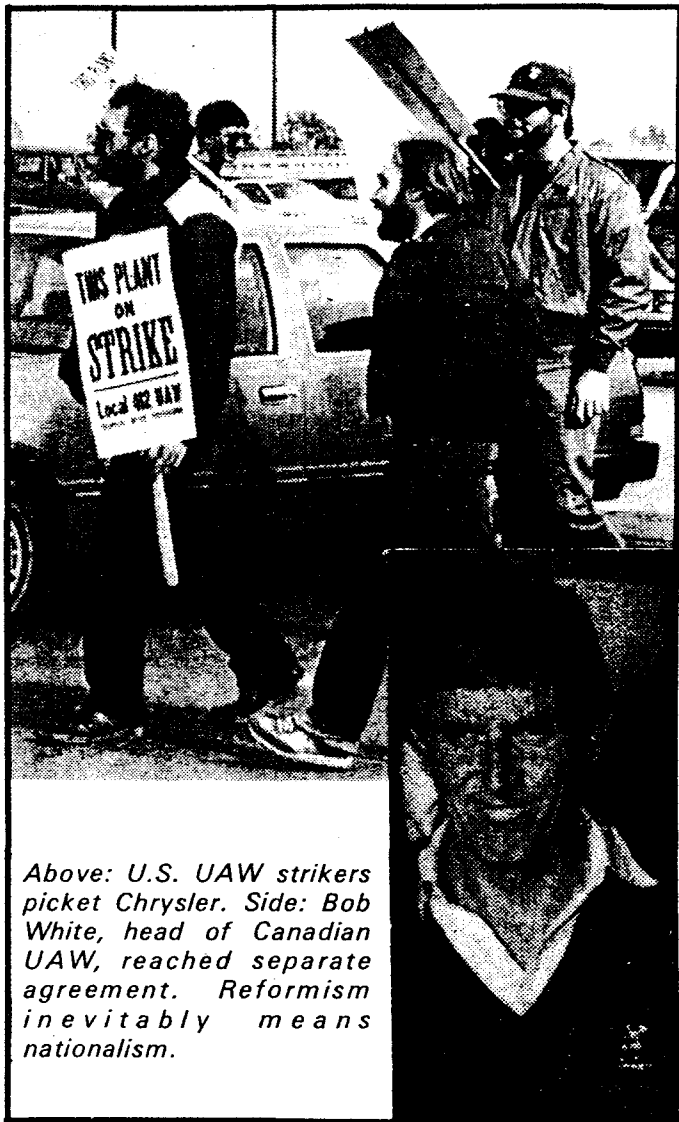
In the morass of groups around the world claiming adherence to Trotskyism, there are a few that genuinely strive to resurrect an authentic communism against the capitulationist history of the "official" Trotskyist internationals. The IKL is one of them. That is why we read with genuine regret the IKL's documents reprinted here.

The IKL's method is completely different from that taught by Lenin and Trotsky. The Group of Oppositional Workers (GOA) which the IKL supports is not a united front for common struggle but a propaganda bloc for a common strategy with non-revolutionaries -- militant but reformist workers. It calls not just for mass action by the workers, as would a united front, but also for a specific program with reformist content: "our least common denominator." And it poses this in specifically reformist terms: "What is decisive for us GM workers is to achieve the greatest possible mobilization for our immediate interests."

To see what this approach means, look at the demands in the IKL/GOA proposal. They include: mainten-

ance of all jobs, higher and more equal wages, and workers' control over hours and conditions. The GOA's platform for shop steward elections contains these and other more specific demands.

This program as it stands is an absurdity. Rather than being immediate and practical as it presents itself, it is in reality utopian. It does not state that its demands, limited though they are, can no longer be achieved under capitalism (with occasional and temporary exceptions). It does not explain that its various demands, some to a great degree, all inroads into profits -- and that capitalist prof-



Above: U.S. UAW strikers picket Chrysler. Side: Bob White, head of Canadian UAW, reached separate agreement. Reformism inevitably means nationalism.

itability is very precarious today. The program thus perpetuates the myth that such demands are achievable simply as reforms under today's crisis conditions.

The union leaders know how dubious such reforms are -- that is why they work overtime to avoid fighting for even their own absolutely minimal demands. Some of them were militants and leftists in their youth but have since become "realistic"; most of them can compare the apparently prosperous days of the 1950s and 1960s with today and explain that "excessive" gains for the workers are impossible now, because of foreign competition or some other lie. Their

behavior proves that a reformed capitalism is out of the question today. There is no middle way between reaction and proletarian revolution.

The difference between the militant reformist workers in organizations like the GOA and those in the bureaucracy is that the bureaucrats have already learned the futility of fighting for a minimal program. Thus the field is left open to those who still retain reformist illusions. The IKL, in aligning itself with the GOA, is pitting an illusory reformist program against bureaucratic semi-reformism. It hopes, evidently, that the reformist militants will eventually grow tired of hitting their heads against brick walls and will thereby become revolutionists. Unfortunately, consistent reformism only leads to consistent defeats; it burns out workers, disorients and cynicizes them. It sets them up not for revolution but for counterrevolution and fascism.

Reformist Internationalism

Likewise, the document's internationalism is utopian precisely because it is posed in a narrow reformist way. It calls for an international rank and file opposition in a single industry based on the above demands. This program does not address the international capitalist crisis but only the crisis in the automobile industry. It focuses only on union issues while ignoring the larger political questions. And therefore this aspect too perpetrates a falsehood. The IKL knows perfectly well that reformism is incapable of uniting the working class, especially across national boundaries. One need only look back at the collapse of the Second International in World War I to see how reformist leaderships split along national lines under extreme pressure. As the current imperialist rivalry heats up, it doesn't take a crystal ball to predict that international solidarity based on reformist agreements will prove to be equally empty.

Despite the IKL/GOA's insistence on internationalism, a program for international workers' collaboration which does not specify the enemy as capitalism (and therefore the solution as socialist revolution) is worthless. Capitalism, in order to survive, must divide the working class along all possible lines, especially nation against nation. A fight for higher wages is excellent, but if the workers do not understand the nature of the enemy they will easily fall into one of the myriad nationalist traps -- protectionist trade barriers, schemes to invest capital only at home, etc. "The working class has no country," Marx wrote, and this profound insight into the capitalist world is the primary barrier between revolutionary and reformist politics.

Rope or Platform?

The IKL's method not only deceives workers; it deceives the would-be revolutionaries themselves. For a "least common denominator" program shared by everyone "according to his own political opinion" is no equal compromise. A reformist, however militant, may

give up one or a few prized (and frequently unattainable) demands; a "revolutionary" adhering to this program gives up the chief goal, revolution. Likewise, the revolutionary asserts that the slate is an effort to "stand consistently for the interests of the workers," whereas in all honesty he must really believe that his colleagues who oppose revolution cannot possibly stand consistently for the working class.

But isn't this unfair to the IKL? Doesn't the GOA document contain, surely at the IKL's insistence, the statement that everyone in the GOA has the right to criticize one another's interpretation of their common platform? It does say this, but the very adherence to a common program sharply delimits the kind of criticisms that can be made. Revolutionaries criticize reformists on the grounds that if they are adamant against overthrowing capitalism, they must inevitably betray the interests of the working class and even the minimal programs that they themselves stand for. We doubt that the IKL can say this openly about its non-revolutionary colleagues in the GOA; for example, in the separate IKL document discussing its work with the GOA there is no such criticism.

Imagine what this criticism would be like if actually carried out. IKL members on the common slate would state that they were revolutionaries holding the only consistent working-class position. But they would also urge workers to vote for colleagues, who, it must be admitted, will betray when the struggle reaches a crisis. "We stand on a common electoral platform that means opposite things to each of us; trust us nevertheless." Most workers won't believe this, and we certainly don't.

The classic Bolshevik tactic for such a situation is "critical support," the opposite of the IKL's attitude towards the GOA. In the Bolshevik tradition, communists speak to the workers as follows: You have confidence in these militant candidates; we do not. You believe their program of reforms is desirable and possible; we think a revolutionary party and socialism are required to achieve anything serious or lasting. We do not wish to confuse our program with theirs. Yet we do not want to be responsible for the defeat of leaders you have trust and hope in; and we do want the illusions in their program to be exposed. Therefore we will support them in the elections because we support your interests and your victory. In supporting them we insist on the right to say that we believe their program won't work, and we say so. Our support, in Lenin's phrase, is like that given by the rope to the hanged man: it is meant to ensure that the betrayals we foresee do not get carried out. In contrast, the IKL supports its colleagues in GOA by putting a common platform under their dangling feet.

The "Rank and File" Fraud

Despite the platform's insistence that the GOA is not a uniform bloc, in reality the IKL is covering for a reformist program and for potential reformist, though militant, leaders. It is significant that the

IKL chooses not to use the scientifically precise word reformist to characterize its colleagues' militant ideas; it calls them "rank and file" programs. This is either a serious misunderstanding or opportunist diplomacy. In either case it means misleadership of the rank and file workers the GOA addresses.

The term "rank and file" caucuses applied to oppositional groups of workers in industry is not an IKL invention. Many centrist outfits -- in the U.S. the International Socialists and its splinters; in Britain the Socialist Workers Party and the Workers Power group -- have stressed the same concept, some more radically than others. The term itself is as untrue and misleading as the program it projects. For the "rank and file" groups are made up of those who put themselves forward as leaders. The masses of ordinary workers do not belong to these groups -- only unusually militant workers do, who seek to lead in the class struggle (or in some cases, to take over union office whether they provide leadership or not). The "rank and file" designation also suggests that the workers' problems are chiefly organizational, and it prevents the workers (both in and out of the caucus) from seeing the need to counterpose program to that of their reformist leaders.

In some cases the "rank and file" group is nothing more than a front group controlled by the operating leftist formation. It is designed to put forward a "limited program" while the leftists running it save the "additional" steps for themselves. In other cases the "rank and file" group is wider; we suspect that the GOA is of the latter type. But in both cases the "rank and file" label is meant to reflect what the leaders (both the leftists and their colleagues) think will be acceptable to the real rank and file. It is an artificial program manufactured by would-be leaders aimed at summing up "what the workers think" -- workers, that is, who accept capitalism.

One of two things generally results. When the working class begins to move rapidly, new layers of potential leadership advance out of the ranks at different rates and development. Some join the communists, others join the "rank and file" groups they find. Of the latter, some take the group and its program very seriously and try to pose more advanced and farther-reaching ideas to radicalize the program beyond the limitations previously set. The "Marxists" typically resist such attempts at radicalization, fearing that their group will move away from what the mass of workers can accept. Thus the left acts to police a "least common denominator" program.

Tragically, those workers who have come to understand that militant non-communist politics are wrong are turned into practitioners of that hopeless program in practice. Without the "Marxists" working night and day to limit the struggle to their militant reform program, this program would have far less currency. The choice between reform and revolution would be much clearer. Indeed, it is not unusual to see "rank and file" groups in which all the militants

really regard themselves as socialists who are sticking to the lowest common denominator program, not their own revolutionary views, because that is what they think the rank and file wants. Without realizing it they are echoing the old reformist minimal-maximalists with even less Sunday socialist rhetoric.

Alternatively, in situations where there is little working-class activity, the "Marxists" either abandon their "rank and file" group or else abandon their would-be vanguard group in favor of the former. Almost always, they become cynical over the failure of the "rank and file" outfits to actually win the rank and file. Typically they conclude that the workers have failed them, the sincere leaders who did everything possible to prod the masses into motion, even crystallizing their "own" program for them.

In either case the centrists delude chiefly themselves. The ranks never hold any "least common denominator" program; in practice, consciousness is mixed. Rank and file workers want many things, but they are not socially blind. They accept the capitalist system as a fact of life along with their own apparent inability to create an alternative. They are also very cynical about all would-be leaderships, given their past experiences. However, once workers do begin to move they recognize their own power and their political horizon widens; they fight for things they didn't believe possible the day before. The logic of struggle leads them to transcend yesterday's consciousness. That is when, if trapped in a "rank and file" group, they try to push it beyond its set limits.

Marxists are materialists who regard themselves as part of the working class, a section which understands in advance the class's real interests and uses this understanding to combat workers' false consciousness. For false consciousness is not a partial form of advanced consciousness; it is simply false, an acceptance of bourgeois ideology in a particular form. What fundamentally forces the workers into motion is not prodding by talented organizers or the attraction of palatable programs but the material conditions of capitalism. The purpose of a Marxist program is to project the workers' real material interests, what they will discover in the course of struggle as it reveals both the nature of the world and their capacities in relation to it.

In contrast, the "rank and file" group is a creation of idealistic thought: approach the workers from outside, find an approximation of what workers think and they will follow it step by step towards revolution. The centrists who practice it do not combat but accept the workers' false consciousness.

The rank and filist conception, by the way, is entirely foreign to the Trotskyist tradition. A recently published collection of writings of the U.S. Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon is illustrative. In a polemic against the Stalinists' use of the term, Cannon got right to the point:

"The chatter about 'rank-and-file leadership' is a disgrace for communists. Such horseplay can

very well be left to the confusionists of syndicalism who object to the idea of a workers' political party on the grounds that the masses need no leaders. This demoralizing nonsense only hampers the organization of the working class and thus serves the bourgeoisie. The mission of the communists is to educate the workers, not to muddle and confuse them; to aspire, frankly, to lead them in their struggle, not to trail behind them and cater to ignorance and prejudice with demagogic slogans." (The Communist League of America 1932-34, page 99.)

Why No Union Democracy?

The false and misleading character of the IKL's particular version of the "rank and file" approach derives from some assumptions explicit or implicit in their documents. One of these is the statement that the union bureaucrats' power "comes in good part from the thoroughgoing liquidation of union democracy." The demise of union democracy is a fact, but it is not an isolated factor that can be cured by such reforms as the IKL/GOA proposal for "unified industrial unions and the introduction of democratic control by the rank and file over shop stewards." Even if such measures were adopted they would quickly become eroded again, under the same pressures that have killed off union democracy in the first place.

Union democracy was lost as a consequence of the development of the labor aristocracy in the trade unions, itself a result of the imperialist epoch of capitalism and its drive toward increased inequality within and between nations. More directly, democracy's decline derives from the growing penetration of the bourgeois state, a penetration encouraged both by the union bureaucrats and their social-democratic political counterparts (in the U.S., the liberal Democrats). When the GOA/IKL calls for a "militant union opposition" as the only way to re-create union democracy, it again demonstrates the reformist nature of its conception. Union democracy will be achieved only through a revolutionary struggle to overturn state power, not by action within the confines of the system. Any fight for union democracy must include mobilizing the workers against the reformist party -- which cannot be done by the "least common denominator" bloc envisioned by the IKL.

No Revolutionary Party

A second assumption behind the IKL/GOA strategy is that workers are not yet ready for revolutionary politics. The "least common denominator" approach deliberately leaves out the counterposition of the revolutionary party to the reformist parties: the GOA is "non-partisan." Hence the most that can be accomplished is the construction of a militant reformist leadership in the unions. This strategy would be described by the American left as "building the movement" first. In the European context, it can only mean acceptance of the existing worker-based parties,

the social-democratic and Stalinist reformists. It was no accident that the British SWP, after years of building lowest common denominator "rank and file" groups, abandoned this perspective only to end up supporting the overt reformist politics of the Labour Party left.

Thus the IKL presents its task as "overcoming the isolation and dispersion of the progressive and militant workers, which is also ours." This isolation is blamed on the absence of a revolutionary party and program, a situation which the IKL laments. We are small and isolated, they say. We wish we had a revolutionary party and program. We really wish we could have "a communist trade union program" and "an international revolutionary tendency in the unions," but, alas, "we have not yet moved very far toward this goal of ours"; it isn't possible now. What then is to be done? Their reply: while we continue to advocate the building of the revolutionary party as our long-term goal, our practical task is first to overcome isolation. This means building groups like the GOA on a militant unionist and not a revolutionary basis.

A genuinely Bolshevik use of the united front tactic would not mean putting off the fight for revolutionary leadership in the unions. The very purpose of united front tactics is to demonstrate, in the course of action, the necessity of the revolutionary party.

Divorced from the struggle for leadership, for the party, united fronts degenerate into long-term opportunist blocs. Building them means building an alternative oppositional form to the party. If this program and this group are the practical needs for today, why should workers need a party (or a pre-party group)? The revolutionary organization in these circumstances is presented mainly as the most consistent fighter for the permanent militant bloc -- not as the representative of a communist alternative. The reality of postponing the fight for the revolutionary party to a later stage is that the later stage never comes.

What About the General Strike?

A third assumption implicit in the IKL's documents is that the revolutionary program is simply an addition to the reformist "least common denominator" program. "We see it as our most important task," writes the IKL, "to further develop our political answers beyond the common understanding of the GOA and introduce them as revolutionary propaganda within the GOA and also in the factory."

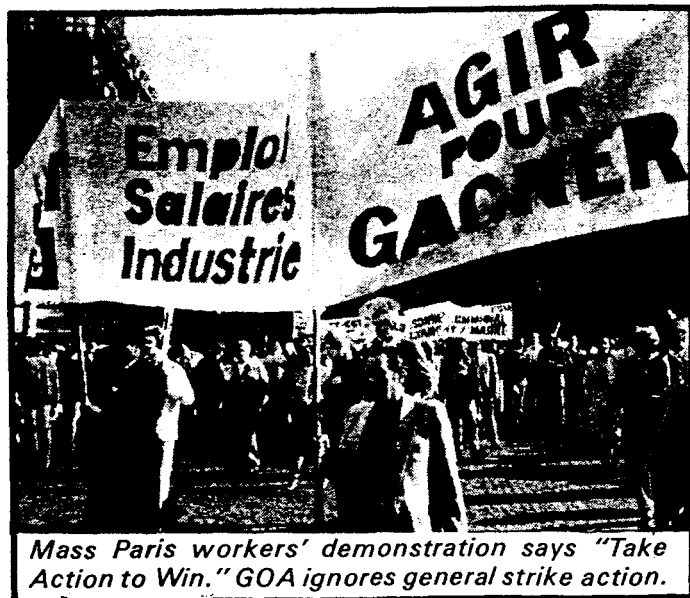
The trouble with this is that the essential revolutionary answers are incompatible with a reformist program; they cannot be based on the GOA's "common understanding." For example, the IKL is so intent on its effort to win the workers through minimal agreement that it ignores the central question of actions that can win victories. It comes close to raising the problem: "In view of the present nearly hopeless situation, the feeling of powerlessness must not become triumphant. Every long march begins with a first step." True, but it offers only the feeble and

utopian steps already discussed. That is because the real answers would require a program opposed to the reformists'.

It is astonishing that the IKL can leave out of its programs the question of the general strike. Workers do feel powerless. This consciousness, generated by years of reformist-inspired detours and concessions, is in stark contrast to the proletariat's objective power. The workers of one sector who fight another sector over a few crumbs do not see that united action would enable them to divide the whole pie.

In this context it is enormously significant that workers around the world -- South Africa and Bolivia most recently -- are rediscovering the general strike. Workers who yesterday could not conceive of such a thing now find themselves in mass motion -- even many who retain their illusions in the reformist officials who have been forced to take the lead but always seek class compromises. If revolutionaries in the industrial countries do the spadework now among the advanced workers, the consequences will be decisive when the European and North American working classes erupt in mass strikes too.

The general strike is not a panacea; it is not applicable as a strategy in every struggle. But it is indispensable in many situations, as was proven --



negatively -- by its absence in the recent British coal miners' strike. Yet for all the IKL's projections of what it will do after the militant first stage is accomplished, it avoids the general strike question assiduously. The reason cannot be simply that "the workers aren't ready"; they are equally unready for some of the speculative demands the IKL does raise. No, the difficulty for the IKL is that the general strike points in practice to the need for clear-cut political answers -- which class shall rule the state. And the economic working-class power it demonstrates poses the question of revolution. But these are answers the IKL thinks must wait for the future. At the very least they would be divisive for a "non-partisan" militant union organization.

Trotskyists can and should raise many political and economic demands short of revolution. That's the purpose of the Transitional Program: it challenges the unions and their misleaders to fight for what the workers need even though they accept capitalism. But these demands -- the sliding scale of wages to combat inflation, dividing the necessary work among the available workers to end unemployment, expropriation of industry without compensation to maintain vital production during crises, etc. -- would undermine the capitalist system. The Marxist point is that the workers' needs are incompatible with capitalism; we do not hide this and suggest that non-revolutionary leadership can accomplish what it cannot.

The IKL also uses the Transitional Program, but differently. In its own document (not written jointly with the GOA) it brings forward the transitional demands of workers' control, expropriation and arming the workers. Echoing Trotsky, it refers to these as a "bridge" to working-class power. It too raises its demands on two levels. But unlike Trotsky, the IKL's two levels are the minimal reforms and the transitional bridge; that is, the transitional demands are a substitute not for the minimal program but for the revolutionary conclusion. Yes, the IKL does agree that "sooner or later" the class struggle will force the working class to consider the question of seizing state power. The problem is that the IKL's mistaken use of the Transitional Program does not lead them to fight for workers to consider that question now.

Parallel to this gross omission is the IKL's underemphasis (to say it gently) of the revolutionary party. In its most far-reaching program, it calls for "the revolutionary seizure of power by the proletariat organized in councils." It also calls for international organization of workers, but limits this to trade union organization and solidarity. It completely omits to state that revolution requires the leadership of an internationalist revolutionary workers' party. We have no doubt that the IKL comrades are for such a party: every issue of their journal carries the slogan, on the front page, "For the Reconstruction of the Fourth International." But it leaves the question of the international party as an abstraction, never made concrete.

The Class Struggle Against Centrism

The IKL has made serious attempts to escape the centrist heritage of the pseudo-Trotskyist milieu that gave it birth. If it is to continue its fight, it must recognize that the viability of its limited democratic and "least common denominator" program is conditioned by an Austrian prosperity that is withering away. The workers swallowed the co-determination schemes of the social democrats, but that time will come to an end as the crisis intensifies. As we have explained, rank and filist schemes which stress the need for immediate minimal programs always place the blame for this unfortunate necessity on the workers' backward consciousness. But backward consciousness is

a consequence of the failure of the advanced, the "socialists," to fight for revolution rather than reform. Any left organization that breaks from the endless cycle of "necessary" reformist stages will take a giant step forward in the interest of revolution.

To its credit, the IKL has recognized that the mainstream currents which emerged from the Fourth International in the post-war years were transformed into petty-bourgeois mockeries of Trotskyism. We suggest to the IKL comrades that such a major capitulation must have not only a historical character but a class causation as well. Trotsky pointed out, correctly in our opinion, that materialists must seek a class-determined cause for major political divergences within the working-class movement.

We believe that the centrist epigones of Trotsky act as the loyal left wing of the middle-class "socialisms" that have usurped the name of Marxism. Whenever a reformist party has elaborated a petty-bourgeois program, there has always been some pseudo-Trotskyist at hand ready to portray it as a socialist program which simply doesn't go far enough. Whenever a Stalinist or nationalist force seized power in East Europe, Asia or elsewhere and proclaimed itself a popular democracy embracing all classes, it was left to the "Trotskyists" to ennoble it as a proletarian state (albeit deformed). The roots of all such cover-ups, we suggest, stem from the failure to break with middle-class radicalism. The IKL's practical work is subject to the same disease.

Now that the material bases for the parasitical strata are disintegrating, the time is ripe for a clear-cut reassertion of proletarian Marxism. For too long our banner has been usurped by the varieties of condescending saviors. Proletarians throughout the world have acquired considerable contempt for the middle-class idealists, the social engineers, pacifists and do-gooders who assume the mantle of working-class leadership. They are right.

The old order of reformism holds its sway over the workers today only because of the absence of a credible alternative. But the reform message attracts few new advocates. With the perspective of permanent revolution we can understand why: democratic gains under capitalism are so dubious that few militants are willing to dedicate their lives to such dreams. Reformism today requires cadres committed at least in theory to a socialist future. Only such people can devote themselves to a program which they mistakenly believe is a first step toward their higher goal.

We urge the comrades of the IKL and others who share similar hopes in rank and filism, least common denominator programs and the like: re-examine your practice. It is crucial to the cause of communism that the proletarian basis of Marxism be revived, that every last vestige of middle-class contamination be swept away. Only thus will the Fourth International be re-created in counterposition to the ghastly mockeries that parade under its banner today. ■