

On the Party's Vanguard Role

By JIM WEST

The author of this article, a Chicago worker, in submitting it, very modestly suggested that it contained some ideas which he hoped might be useful for stimulating discussion around a central question for all those who identify themselves with the Left in American politics. We think our readers will agree that this article does just that, and that it presents its own view persuasively and, at the same time, constructively. Let us have your opinions, please.—Ed.

AMERICAN COMMUNISTS are agreed that our chief task is to overcome isolation.

We are also agreed that the isolation we must surmount is that of a vanguard organization; for the 16th Convention affirmed this basic concept in a special, though generalized, section of the main resolution.

It is in the arena of *how a vanguard* overcomes its isolation that many of our disagreements occur.

This is no accident; for among other reasons, the vanguard concept contains within it both a contradiction and the means for working out that contradiction.

Among its many distinguishing features, the vanguard represents the interests of the future in the working-class movement of the present. The contradiction between the present and the future is overcome not by ideas of desperation, but by the working-class struggles and people's movements—provided the vanguard

plays its role of bringing class and social consciousness into the working-class movements.

There are those who equate vanguard role with direct leadership over the working class at all times. This is an idea of impatience. To be sure, the vanguard eventually earns its way to leadership of the class; but this does not mean that a vanguard must necessarily be in direct leadership of the class every moment of each stage of development.

To the degree that the working class and its allies are won over to the road of struggle for socialism, to that degree can the vanguard enjoy mass support and wield mass influence. More to the point, to the degree that a vanguard fulfills its role concretely in each given stage of development, to that degree can it break its isolation and become a mass influence.

Obviously, such an approach has

nothing in common with the bankrupt idea that the vanguard concept is outmoded or sectarian in the present period. This approach also refutes the impatient idea that the ability of the vanguard to directly lead the masses here and now is all that counts—the idea which confronts the party with the impossible choice: since we aren't leading the masses today, we aren't a vanguard, so why try to be one with all the stigma it carries? It further rejects the desperation idea that changes in name and form per se—without regard to the problems before the people, the tasks before our class, the specific nature of the Party's role—will bring about the direct leadership of the vanguard over the class at once.

THE DIRECT LEADERSHIP DISTORTION

This exaggerated emphasis on direct leadership, condemned by the 16th Convention as "arrogant" and one that was heedless of our real position of strength and influence, has been largely responsible for some of the worst sectarian and opportunist errors of the past (and even into the present).

In trade-union work, it led to efforts at "capturing control" of locals and unions. It tended to negate the united front approach in which a Communist minority *shares* leadership with a non-Communist majority. It contributed to cutting us off from our allies, to going it alone,

to a deepening of isolation.

In certain mass organizations it occasionally gave rise to a kind of deviousness; that is, because of reactionary attacks, the chief thing was one's ability to hide his Communist position on questions (not to speak of identity). In such instances, the measure of success was ability to get elected to leadership in the organization on the basis of the mass organization's program (all well and good) *but* with no regard whatsoever to questions of vanguard aims and perspectives.

In this latter case, it must be added in all fairness to the many fine comrades involved, that the responsibility is least of all theirs. The fact is, the failure of the Party to work out a concrete approach to vanguard role made it impossible for these comrades to see how they could play such a role. It is thus no accident—and here is the point—that, having achieved positions of "direct leadership" (ostensibly fulfilling the vanguard concept thereby), many of these comrades have dropped away from the Party or are on the way out because they see no need for the Party today!

While most of our errors in the past have been of the Left-sectarian variety, the foregoing may serve to show the common basis for many Left and Right errors in the "direct leadership" distortion of the vanguard concept. This underscores the folly of combatting Left-sectarian distortions with revisionist dis-

tortions of the same principle; of being a "Left" or a "Right" exponent of the vanguard concept.

I believe that the fight against our isolation will be advanced by rejecting both variations of this oversimplified and distorted view of our vanguard role; by addressing ourselves to the fight for a Marxist-Leninist view of the vanguard role. We are compelled to do this now because the 16th Convention charged the National Committee with responsibility for drafting a basic program which will "define clearly and unequivocally the viewpoint of American Communists on all fundamental problems of the struggle for socialism in the United States."

TOWARD CONCRETE EXPRESSION OF VANGUARD ROLE

At the heart of the question of socialism is the problem of the *working class coming into the leadership of the nation*. The road to socialism in any given country is the concrete way whereby the working class, with its allies, in *that* country may come, step by step, into eventual leadership of the nation.

To determine the vanguard task concretely, it is necessary to determine at what point of the advance towards socialism the working class stands at each given stage of development.

The organization of American

workers into trade unions, especially in the basic, mass production industries, brought about a large measure of fulfillment to a particular stage in the advance of our class toward leadership of the nation.

Even as it must still complete this big forward step (through labor unity, through organizing many still unorganized, especially in the South)—the general outlines of the next stage of advance have been shaping up.

Experience teaches more and more workers that defense and promotion of their economic welfare requires more than economic struggle alone. In addition, political and legislative struggles are becoming ever more essential, even decisive.

All signs point to the next stage in the step-by-step advance to leadership of the nation as being the *emergence of the American working class as an independent political force in the life of our country*.

It is the unique nature of this next forward step that should determine the specific, concrete character of the vanguard role and tasks today—the fundamental point of approach by the vanguard to all questions of the day.

The Communist Party in the 30's successfully fulfilled its vanguard role (and consequently became a mass influence) not so much because a depression existed, but rather because it was able to work out its vanguard role suited to the specific

tasks facing the working class at that time. (In this connection, the Extraordinary Conference of 1933, and its famed Open Letter to the Membership, merit special study at this time). Obviously, objective conditions then tended to favor Left activity but without a correct, concrete approach to vanguard role, and the correct mass line and policies flowing therefrom, those conditions would have been just so many more lost opportunities.

As it turned out, the C.P. played an indispensable, decisive role in helping the class solve an historic task. This brought about an end to its isolation. It brought an identity with the working class movement rarely equalled by any other socialist movement in our country.

TOWARD THE NEXT HISTORIC FORWARD STEP

The emergence of the working class as an independent political force in American life is a difficult task. Viewed as a stage in the political and social growth of the class of workers, it is obvious the class won't *enter* as an independent political force in one fell swoop; it will *emerge* from this stage as a result of a whole process of development.

A conscious approach by the vanguard to this historic task requires working out a series of vast, complex questions, such as: how to prepare the working class to take this step; tackling all the ideological,

organizational, tactical questions involved; how to stimulate and produce the new literature, culture, agitation required by this step; how to develop the skill, the art, of "linking up" day-to-day struggles for democracy, peace, economic security with the aim of independent political emergence; how to meet the different levels of understanding among workers; how to unite those ready for independent political action now (and who are actively building COPE today) with those who are still more or less blindly following in the wake of the Democratic Party and with those who are still politically passive.

The outlining of just some of these questions should suffice to show what an enormous, historic undertaking it is; and why a vanguard is indispensable.

POLITICAL EMERGENCE AND COALITION TASKS

The placing of this basic vanguard task has nothing in common with the effort of some die-hard sectarians to negate the struggle for an anti-monopoly coalition and the coalition struggle to complete the bourgeois democratic tasks in the South—as foremost, crucial mass needs of the day.

The placing of this basic, historic aim of the present stage, far from negating these mass tasks, provides the vanguard's special approach to them, bringing a vital contribution

to the coalitions which no other organization is doing, and for which our Party is uniquely qualified.

More, attempting to cope with the problem of the main driving forces of these coalitions and movements, it seeks to solve the problem of how to achieve labor's role in them. In so doing, it seeks to work out how the vanguard may make its own maximum contribution in an appropriate manner, thus breaking its isolation.

Viewed in this light, the movements against monopoly and for completion of bourgeois democratic tasks in the South are seen as being not solely people's, all-class (except for the small gang of monopolists) movements—but *also* as movements embracing a number of classes and groups with differing viewpoints, interests, etc., and in which the working class has special interests as well, and a special role to play.

It is, of course, essential to keep in mind and to emphasize the broad, the multi-class nature of these coalitions. But this emphasis alone will not necessarily solve the problem of bringing these coalitions into existence and developing them in a progressive direction.

If we are to pass beyond the stage of slogan-chanting on the need, for example, of an anti-monopoly coalition, it is necessary to recognize the different economic and social groups that must make up that movement, the relationship of their different interests and problems, the role each

has to play, etc. In other words, the vanguard must develop a *class approach* (based on the chief tasks before the working class today) to the various coalition movements.

To this day we have not fully worked out the relationship between anti-monopoly coalition and the coalition for completing bourgeois democratic tasks in the South and the fight for Negro rights generally. A decisive element enabling us to work out this relationship is to be found in the approach afforded by seeking to work out the chief historic class task today; that is, in the light of the emergence of the working class as an independent political force.

Nor is this question placed as a substitute for the fight for peace, for democracy, for civil rights, etc. While allowing for all varieties of struggles on these and other problems, it sets forth that which is basic to the *content* of Communist work in this period, even if it cannot be expressed in the mass movements in the most direct way at all times or in all conditions. It defines that which we strive for at this time, inasmuch as this is what the class is reaching out and aspiring towards.

In the fight for peace, it may be that few things in the beginning will contribute directly or immediately to the working class emerging as an independent political force. And of course, it is not essential that they lead directly to this result in

order for us to participate in various peace activities. What is important is that we remain conscious of this basic task; that we seek, without cease, the ways and means whereby we may advance the fulfillment of this historic goal in the course of the fight for peace.

This applies to all arenas of struggle and mass activity: economic struggles, youth, women, nationality groups, professional, cultural, etc. It is that which unifies all our work, giving it common purpose and direction. It is that which enables a Communist club and an individual Communist to find their bearings in this period, the North Star, helping them work out the relationship between mass work today and the next step towards the socialist future.

IN SUMMARY

The historic 16th Convention, settling a number of questions which threatened the Marxist-Leninist basis and unity of our Party, making a number of contributions towards clarifying new questions arising out of the changed situation, began to clear the decks for a new upsurge in the mass work of our Party.

Today, as we turn to the issues confronting the people, we face the task of hammering out the basic program of the Party from which will be projected the mass line for the immediate years ahead.

Keystone to program and mass line in any given historic period is the chief task which faces the working class at the time in its step-by-step advance to the leadership of the nation.

The emergence of the working class as an independent political force, with its own program and policies, becoming organizationally independent of monopoly's parties, and capable of building and leading people's coalitions, shapes up as the chief task in this period.

This determines the concrete nature of the vanguard role and tasks at this stage. The great collective effort to solve the problems of content involved in this historic task is the process whereby we break our isolation.

By recognizing and developing this as the *basis* of our approach to all questions, we arm our Party with the means for overcoming aimless drift. We thereby begin to give vanguard purpose and direction to our day-to-day work, which, if resolutely pursued, brings the initiative in national affairs into the hands of the working class; bringing, consequently, an initiative to the vanguard which can only come from playing a role vital to its class.

A mass line based on accomplishing this class objective in the period ahead arms our Party with a strategic, longer-run approach, enabling it to rise above a petty, hand-to-mouth, blind existence; and helping it overcome purely administrative,

purely tactical approaches. It would help arm the Party with a policy for activity in all kinds of political and economic climates under capitalism in the years ahead.

It would facilitate the ability of the Party to *guide*, to *teach*, to *encourage* workers to self-participation in working out their own problems, to gain confidence in their ability to lead the people. It would strengthen the Party against tendencies to intervene in the daily affairs of the labor and people's movements over every little question—the tendency to try to work out everything *for* the working class, to substitute for it, to take direct leadership over it without regard to whether or not it wants it.

It would provide a vanguard yardstick for measuring the effectiveness of day-to-day work: does it advance or retard the aim of helping bring about the emergence of our class as an independent political force? It would restore a proper sense of values as to what is most important, what is of secondary importance, etc.

As the basic approach to mass line, it would provide the soundest foundation from which to determine deviations to the Right and to the Left. For, in the absence of a cor-

rect mass line, the fight against "Right" and "Left" deviations is a fight against windmills which only serves to befog our isolation!

Further, the basic mass line provides the healthiest basis for criticism and self-criticism. In its absence, criticism and self-criticism can too readily degenerate into meaningless, cruel moralizing, soul-searching subjectivity, and exercises in amateur psychiatry.

Finally, the basic mass line, imbedded in helping the working class achieve its next big forward step to socialism, would provide the spark for revitalizing Marxist-Leninist education and theory in the Party; for cadre training on a planned, systematic basis; for advancing and developing the *indispensable* role of the Party and of the Communist Press, without understanding which, we cannot build the Party and the Press.

Conversely, given the conviction of the Party's indispensable, vanguard role—a conviction which can arise only from seeing its concrete application to the needs of the day—we can overcome gigantic obstacles and move mountains, as we have in the past, as we will again in the near future.

In our October issue, Hyman Lumer will analyze the contents and weigh the significance of the new book by Victor Perlo, just issued by International Publishers, New York.—Ed.