THREE DOCUMENTS
OF THE MAOIST COMMUNIST GROUP
Three Documents of the Maoist Communist Group.

Published June 2015
Maoist Communist Group
maoistcommunistgroup@riseup.net
maoistcommunistgroup.com
INTRODUCTION

On Maoist Practice

SPARC: Development and Failure of a Political Project

A Beginning: Forging Links with the Masses in a Popular Neighborhood

CONTENTS

Introduction 2

On Maoist Practice 4

SPARC: Development and Failure of a Political Project 18

A Beginning: Forging Links with the Masses in a Popular Neighborhood 38
INTRODUCTION

One year ago, the Maoist Communist Group was constituted on the political basis of our Founding Statement. In short introductory remarks to that document, we identified the central task of the moment to be “ideological consolidation”—understood as the product of a struggle over aspects of our formal project. We saw this as a necessary corrective to the eclecticism that had plagued our antecedent organization, the NCP-OC. At the same time, we began a project of mass work on the neighborhood front. We held that there would necessarily have to be a long-term gap separating ideological struggle over advanced questions from our incipient mass work. Today, we can say that our understanding of ideological struggle was impermissibly abstract.

While we correctly identified problems that continue to demand resolution—what is meant by ‘proletarian feminism’ in distinction to other communist approaches to the woman question? Did the GPCR effectively draw to a close in February 1967, or did it end with the Ninth National Congress of the CCP, or with the ‘One Strike-Three Anti’ campaign, or...? What are the primary lessons, positive and negative, that we must draw from the GPCR? What is the strategic significance of the commune form? How are we to understand the Maoist conception of the party? etc.—we did not appreciate that we can only begin to address these problems by forging organized mass links in concrete class situations. There can be no ‘ideological consolidation’ abstracted from mass links. Ideological consolidation must be the product of a struggle that relates the project of the whole to summations that draw generalizable lessons from our own experience and systematize proletarian ideology as it lives in the mass movement.

The texts that follow represent our first public attempts to sum up our experience. The three texts taken together constitute the current political basis of our organizational unity.

Despite its appearance as the first text in the series, “On Maoist Practice” represents a theoretical synthesis of the lessons elaborated in the summations that follow it. Its broad aim is to begin the task of defining a communist practice for the current period in relation to that of building a party of a new type in the US. Given the fact that the sequence named by ‘Mao,’ in particular the episode of the GPCR, is the most advanced historical experience available to us, such a communist practice will necessarily be a Maoist practice.
A Maoist practice is something more than what is expressed by the formula: formal political line + positions on particular historical sequences + work among the exploited and oppressed layers of society. Minimally, a Maoist practice entails the development of a mass political line out of protracted interventions in concrete class situations by summing them up in light of lessons drawn from history.

To define a Maoist practice is at the same time to undertake a genuine process of unification.

If the small-group left engages in ideological struggle over exchanges of experiences—experiences systematized in the form of conscientious and timely summations that aim to determine a common political practice—then we will have opened a path to building material unity in the line of party construction. However, if we refuse to undertake public summations, then unification will continue to elude us: we will remain in essence a loose collection of sects, even if we manage to gather all the small groups together under a single denomination and bring a large number of parishioners into the flock.

For this reason, these texts are not simply a summation of our work, but at the same time a call for the rest of the small-group left to carry out their own public summations of protracted mass work. We look forward to engaging in ideological struggle over such summations.

We can only define a Maoist practice collectively and over time by summing up experience alongside the masses. The texts that follow mark the beginning of what will surely prove to be a long and difficult path.

---

1 By "small-group left," we refer to all far-left political groups in the US, without exception.
ON MAOIST PRACTICE

A concrete communist politics can only develop today by taking seriously Mao’s affirmation that “the popular masses are endowed with an infinite creative power.” Who are the masses?—and what is the significance of posing this question for our political practice as militants?

The question of the masses is originally formulated in the opening lines of Mao’s first important text, his *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society* (1926): “Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is the question of primary importance for the revolution.” The question of the masses opens a breach in thought and history that will be seized by the proper name Mao. A proper name always fixes a singularity. The real given by the proper name Mao is discontinuous with the real given by the proper name Lenin. No “exchange of equivalents” is possible here. In revolutionary history, the proper name locates a fracture in the existing order that opens under the condition of a question. We must begin, then, with the figure of Lenin.

**Enemies and Friends**

At the social level, Lenin defines the masses as the remainder when the bourgeoisie, as a social class, is subtracted from the social whole. Lenin writes: “All parties affiliated to the Third International must at all costs give effect to the slogans: ‘Deeper into the thick of the masses,’

---

4 The Lenin of this document is necessarily schematic. Our intention is to draw a line in theory between Lenin and Mao on the question of the masses. The point is not that Lenin should have acted more like Mao, but rather that Lenin, faced with problems posed by both his own historical moment and the failure of the Paris Commune, invented a class politics that harnessed mass creativity to the needs of the revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat. For his part, Mao invented a mass politics in light of problems posed by both his own historical moment and the triumph of revisionism in the Soviet Union. Just as Lenin summed up his experience in light of the lessons he drew from the Paris Commune, and just as Mao summed up his experience in light of the lessons he drew from the history of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union, so we must sum up our own experience in light of the lessons we draw from the history of the Chinese Revolution and socialist China, in particular the initial sequence of the GPCR and the subsequent restoration of capitalism. It is in this sense that we are Maoists.
‘Closer links with the masses’—meaning by the masses all those who toil and are exploited by capital.”5

For Lenin, however, the concept of the masses is not a social concept (i.e., it does not aim to provide knowledge of a social reality), but is a political concept whose object is negatively defined at the political level in relation to the proletariat and bourgeoisie: “Everyone knows that the masses are divided into classes; that the masses can be contrasted to classes only by contrasting the vast majority in general, regardless of division according to status in the social system of production, to categories holding a definite status in the social system of production; that usually, and in the majority of cases, at least in modern civilized countries, classes are led by political parties.”6

The masses are thus constituted at the political level as the object of a struggle between the two political classes—the bourgeoisie and the proletariat—the only classes capable of organizing a state project that can lead the masses. More precisely, the concept of the masses, for Lenin, links two dialectical couples: the bourgeois enemy organized as the class-state that leads the masses by managing their exploitation (the dialectic bourgeoisie-masses), and the proletariat organized as a vanguard class party that leads the masses in order to take state power through revolution (the dialectic proletariat-masses).7 The masses are those classes and social groups whose real movement is apprehended in order to organize the state project of the proletariat (revolution) or that of the bourgeoisie (conservation). Mass initiative is effectively exhausted in the relation of leadership that organizes it—which is to say: it is drained in the tactics of seizing state power from the bourgeoisie with the aim of smashing the bourgeois state and building a proletarian state of a new type. The party puts forth a class perspective in order to resolve ‘from without’ the contradiction between the masses and the bourgeois state. The creative power of the masses is circumscribed by the organized class politics of the proletariat that masters it in the line of revolution. The mass, or communist, perspective is thinkable as a strategic horizon, but not as a practicable reality.

To lead is always to effect a break. Both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat break with the dispersal of the masses—through the organized class state and the organized class party, respectively. The proletariat can organize itself politically only under the condition of a rupture with mass spontaneity, understood as the enclosure of the masses under bourgeois ideology.

7 We should note that these contradictions are asymmetrical, since in the dialectic proletariat-masses, the proletariat is counted twice: once as an element internal to the masses, once as an element that breaks with the masses. This provides us with an important positive lesson for our own political engagement. If we fail to count ourselves twice, we cannot properly pose the question of the party to the masses, and we become either right or ‘left’ liquidationists. If we count ourselves as communists without counting ourselves as advanced elements of the mass movement—if we conceive of politics as popularizing our political line, formulated abstractly—then we prevent the masses from appropriating the question of the party for themselves, and we remain a small-group sect. If we count ourselves as advanced elements of the masses without counting ourselves as communists, then we dissolve the question of the party, which we must put forward in each class situation, in an undifferentiated democratic mass politics.
The section of the proletariat that organizes itself as the Leninist class party must first be *conscious* of the antagonism with the bourgeois social and political order.

For Lenin, the path from social class to political class thus requires a voluntary intervention on the basis of consciousness that reflects the antagonism with the bourgeois social whole. It is not, as it is for Marx, the unconscious and spontaneous result of the historical development of social antagonisms. However, it remains a direct path, in the sense that the composition of the masses is determinable at the level of social class, prior to the organization of an advanced section of the proletariat into a political party. As the link between the contradictions bourgeoisie-masses and proletariat-masses, the concept of the masses names an object that is effectively invariant in its determination between the political level, to which it belongs, and the social level, from which it emerges. This invariance must be grasped together with the relative exteriority of the Leninist class party.8 To the objectivity of the masses at one pole of the dialectic corresponds the subjectivity of the party as consciousness at the other. The party as pure subject is divided from the objective social contradictions it must resolve on the terrain of politics. This subjective dimension of the party is what maintains the political class line of the proletariat in the face of bourgeois ideological and political domination of society before the revolution.

With Mao, the concept of the masses has a completely *new* sense, born out of the splitting of the concept of the masses in the Leninist sense.

Everything here depends on grasping the interrogative form under which the concept of the masses is arranged. For Mao, the master thinker of the political conjuncture (= the present grasped as a synthesis of contradictions), it is the task of militants to pose, at every moment, the question: ‘*Who are the masses?*’ Reading *Capital*—while necessary in order to grasp the laws of capitalism as a mode of production—will not, by itself, allow us properly to pose the question of the masses. Nor is the composition of the masses determinable in advance by analyzing the class structure of a given social formation. Rather, the question of the masses only finds its proper sense in the political conjuncture, in the form of a social investigation that aims to specify those social classes and groups engaged in economic, ideological and political combat against the bourgeois class enemy, progressively united under the leadership of the proletarian class party and divided from those counter-forces that, under the leadership of the bourgeois class state, seek to disorganize their unity:

“Our chief method of investigation must be to dissect the different social classes, the ultimate purpose being to understand their interrelations, to arrive at a correct appraisal of class forces and then to formulate the correct tactics for the struggle, defining which classes constitute the main force in the revolutionary struggle, which classes are to be won over as allies and which classes

8 The crudest expression of the exteriority of the party is found in Lenin’s adoption of the “profoundly true and important words of Karl Kautsky” in *What is to be Done?:* “The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the *bourgeois intelligentsia* [K. K.’s italics]: it was in the minds of individual members of this stratum that modern socialism originated, and it was they who communicated it to the more intellectually developed proletarians who, in their turn, introduce it into the proletarian class struggle.” V.I. Lenin, “What is to be Done?,” *Collected Works*, Volume 5 (Moscow: 1964), 383.
are to be overthrown.”

For Mao, the masses are a unity of structural class determination and social force. What do we mean by ‘structural class determination’? What do we mean by ‘social force’?

Every social class is structurally determined through a constitutive division: between its abstract determination and its inscription in the social whole.

The proletariat and the bourgeoisie are abstractly determined as the two opposing classes that define capitalism as a mode of production: the proletariat as that class of direct producers that, separated from the means of production, is forced to sell its labor power in order to survive; and the bourgeoisie as that class which, enjoying a monopoly over the means of production, appropriates the surplus labor of the proletariat in the form of surplus value.

Bourgeois domination at the level of abstract determination is what gives each capitalist social formation its class character, making of every inscription in the social whole an act of annexation to the bourgeois world.

The inscription of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in the bourgeois social whole—that is: the historicization of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, their material form of existence—subjects their abstract determinations to restructuring and decomposition. It is at this historical level that the two fundamental classes are determined according to their various fractions and strata. The inscription of the proletariat in the bourgeois social whole produces, for example, the stratum of the labor aristocracy as the inverse of its abstract determination. The bourgeoisie, inscribed in its own world, finds itself fragmented along various lines: comprador and national; bureaucrat and private; industrial, banking and commercial.

Other classes, abstractly determined in antecedent modes of production, are overdetermined by their inscription in the bourgeois social whole. For example, in the feudal mode of production, the landlord class is determined as that social class that lives off the tributary rents of the peasant class. Once the landlord class is inscribed in the bourgeois social whole, the tributary relation that abstractly determines the landlord class is subordinated to specifically capitalist relations of production, giving rise to a new reality: that of semi-feudalism.

Finally, new classes emerge at the level of inscription in the social whole (such as the petty bourgeoisie) which can be thought abstractly only by synthesizing the diversity of places in which they are inscribed (the petty bourgeoisie, for example, includes intellectuals, certain small business owners, salaried employees…). For such social classes, their varied and complex relations with the bourgeoisie and proletariat in historically-given capitalist societies are primary in relation to abstract determination.

Structural class determination, however, is not enough either to constitute the masses as a social force or to trace the path from social to political class. For Mao, it is only in relation to the

---

dialectic of structural determination (abstract determination, inscription in the social whole) that the masses and the political classes can constitute themselves, in the conjuncture, as a dialectic of social forces:

—The masses emerge as a social force by dividing themselves from structural determination. The masses are a collective social force of classes and social groups that are progressively united in their relation to the proletarian class organization on the basis of their resistance to inscription in the bourgeois social whole. This resistance to inscription extends to the after-revolution: during the GPCR, the broad masses refused to be inscribed in the new bourgeois world being constructed by the ‘red’ bourgeoisie. The Maoist concept of the masses is a rigorously partisan concept. It exhibits the motive forces of the revolutionary process progressively united under the leadership of the proletarian class party.

—The proletariat becomes a political class through its capacity to link the unity of the masses with the struggle against the class enemy—that is, against that counter-force which aims to reproduce the bourgeois social whole. The proletariat is thus constituted as the leading force of the revolutionary process. Unification of the masses must pass through the relation of leadership by the proletariat organized as a political class. For its part, the bourgeoisie becomes a political class through its efforts at uniting the social whole around a state project of conservation.

The masses are not, as they are with Lenin, negatively defined in relation to political class, but must instead be elaborated as the camp of the revolution. The question ‘Who are the masses?’ divides into two: ‘Who are our enemies? Who are our friends?’—“which classes are to be won over as allies and which classes are to be overthrown.” The Leninist concept of the masses, as an invariant that links two dialectical couples, splits itself:

—The masses as a social force are composed of those classes and social groups that—before the victory of the revolution, or in the face of a new bureaucratic bourgeoisie after the revolution—refuse to remain in their designated places, and thus actively resist structural determination. The masses as a social force are progressively united under the leadership of the proletarian class organization, but are for all that excessive in relation to the proletarian state project.

—A remainder—the product of the dialectic with the proletarian class organization through which the masses emerge as a social force—is composed of those classes and social groups that retrace their inscription in the bourgeois social whole, and thus affirm the finitude of structural determination. This remainder is unified under the leadership of the bourgeois class state.

We can only specify the social composition of the masses by at every moment drawing a bright line of demarcation between the camp of the revolution and the camp of the counter-revolution.

As militants, we can only draw this line through a protracted intervention in the life of the masses.
Knowledge and Mass Practice

Mass links here are an absolute requirement for knowledge: we cannot determine the camp of the revolution with any precision by, for example, carrying out a 'conjunctural analysis' on the basis of government statistics or information gathered by bourgeois news agencies. The question 'Who are the masses?' can only be approached through a protracted intervention that links the struggle against the class enemy to the unity of the mass movement. Our task is to systematize, with the masses, the concrete forms of proletarian ideology living in the mass movement. This means that the extent of our knowledge at present is strictly limited by the modesty of our experience and the lack of genuine public summations available to us. In the current moment, small-group communists that respond to strategic questions with detailed battle plans are simply building castles in the air.

To carry out social investigation, in the Maoist sense, is not to approach a front in the struggle (housing, neighborhood, work, youth) and then proceed to gather and synthesize data. Rather, social investigation is what initiates a process of fusion with the real mass movement. Only if we experience with the masses the need to transform the material situation, only if we proceed in the process of transformation by supporting the capacity of the masses to organize themselves, only if we put forward propositions that aim to unite the advanced sections of the masses around our strategic slogan... in short: only if we serve the people, can we discover the relationships between concrete struggles on a given front and the forms assumed by proletarian ideology on that front, in order to begin to address the question: 'Who are the masses?' = 'Who are our enemies? Who are our friends?'

The notion that serving the people amounts to philanthropy of a 'red' type is revisionist. To serve the people is always to line up subjectively, in our concrete practice, alongside the masses in struggle. Social investigation, if it is not to be narrowly empiricist:

—must be a collective investigation, carried out with the most combative sections of the masses, not by our group alone,

—must always aim to help the advanced of the mass movement organize the intermediate layers around a precise point, with clear class stakes,

—must avoid sterile petty bourgeois intellectualism of the type: first we carry out social investigation, then we engage in mass work.

Mass links constitute the indispensable requirement for knowledge. If we remain isolated from the concrete movement of the masses in struggle, we will be unable to grasp either the composition of the masses or their concrete forms of class combat.

The distance between Marx and Mao on the question of organizing mass links can be traced by comparing their respective schemas on the movement of knowledge. For Marx, the movement of knowledge, conditioned by the movement of the real (the concrete situation), is divided into
two successive sub-movements: an analytic movement that proceeds from (1) the imaginary concrete to (2) abstract definitions, followed by a synthetic movement that starts from those abstract definitions, assimilates the imaginary concrete, and arrives at (3) reproduction of the concrete situation in thought.  

This double movement of thought is dominated by its second leg, which constitutes knowledge as a kind of “summing up” of experience (Marx: “the latter is obviously the scientifically correct method.”) The movement of the whole—the movement of thought seized in conjunction with its real condition—is a virtual circuit whose endpoint reproduces the real in thought: “The first procedure attenuates the comprehensive visualization to abstract determinations, the second leads from abstract determinations by way of thinking to the reproduction of the concrete.”

Mao follows Marx in dividing the movement of knowledge into two sub-movements. For Mao, the movement of knowledge is conditioned “by social practice, and from it alone.” The first movement proceeds from (1) perceptions accumulated in practice to (2) the formation of ideas. The second movement then returns from ideas to (3) existence, but here—unlike with Marx, for whom there remains a relative separation of knowledge and practice—existence is not the real-in-thought (knowledge), but social practice, the condition of the movement of knowledge, now a field in which the ideas formed in the first movement can be verified: “produce the truth through practice, and again through practice verify and develop the truth.”

The cycle of knowledge and practice is dominated, as with Marx, by its second leg: “This leap is more important than the previous one. For it is this leap alone that can prove the correctness or incorrectness of the first leap in cognition.” The movement of the whole is a closed circuit of knowledge and organization that begins and ends with social practice—or what is the same, goes from the masses to the masses:

“This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagat and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action.”

The name for the Maoist circuit of knowledge and organization is the mass line.

---

11 Ibid., 38: “The latter is obviously the correct scientific method. The concrete is concrete because it is a synthesis of many determinations, thus a unity of the diverse. In thinking, it therefore appears as a process of summing-up, as a result, not as the starting point, although it is the real starting point, and thus also the starting point of perception and conception.”
12 Ibid., 38.
15 “Correct Ideas,” 32.
The Mass Line

The genealogy of the mass line is a series of divisions:

—what divides Marxism from utopian socialism is that Marxism is bound up with the question of knowledge of the laws of history, which ‘spontaneously’ effects the passage from social class (in-itself) to political class (for-itself);

—what divides Leninism from the Marxism of the nineteenth century is that the Leninist party is invented as a means of bringing class consciousness to the masses in order to organize the taking of state power through revolution—the passage from social class to political class no longer being ‘spontaneous’, but one that depends on the practice of organization by the proletarian class party (the Leninist class line);

—what divides Maoism from Leninism is that the organization of the Maoist party is the organization of the dispersed—but correct—ideas of the masses from the strategic perspective of communism, so that political class is no longer constituted through a process internal to the proletariat—proletariat as knower (Marx), or as external and conscious organizer (Lenin)—but rather through the splitting of the movement (of knowledge, of organization) between, on the one hand, the class party, and on the other hand, the broad masses and mass organizations.

The mass line in this way attempts to resolve a contradiction that eventually—during the 1930s—led the Leninist party to fuse with the state, namely the contradiction between the party as site of consciousness (of the antagonism with the social and political order) and the masses as objectivity into which that consciousness must be imported. The Leninist party, organized around the taking and maintaining of state power, can think communism in strategic terms as the horizon within which the revolutionary process unfolds. But this means that communism—an affair of the masses, not simply the proletariat—is subordinated to a series of material problems concerning the conquest and maintenance of state power. The mass movement is exhausted in its relation to the state, a relation that is organized and acted upon by the class party as the subjective bearer of consciousness.

With the masses in their place, the state comes to dominate the party (under Stalin), and the subjective party is cancelled in the bureaucratic party-state—which increasingly identifies its role as reproducing capitalist technical relations of production in the name of productive efficiency. (It is this absorption of the development of productive forces by the bureaucratic party-state that will clear the path for the emergence of its technocratic variant under Khrushchev.)

Once the party fuses with the state, and socialism becomes state-construction—rather than a process in which the party leads the masses in the extinction of the state—then democratic centralism loses its political character and is reduced to its administrative dimension, the rules according to which the minority submits to the majority, the lower bodies to the higher bodies,
and so forth. The mass line is a critique of this narrowly-Leninist (Stalinist, but also Trotskyist) notion of democratic centralism:

“What is meant by centralism? First, there must be concentration of correct ideas. Unity of understanding, of policy, plan, command and action is attained on the basis of concentrating correct ideas. This is unity through centralism. But if all those concerned are still not clear about the problems, if their opinions are still unexpressed or their anger is still not vented, how can you achieve this unity through centralism? Without democracy, it is impossible to sum up experience correctly. Without democracy, without ideas coming from the masses, it is impossible to formulate good lines, principles, policies or methods. As far as the formulation of lines, principles, policies and methods is concerned, our leading organs merely play the role of a processing plant.”¹⁷

For the political line of the proletarian class organization to be a mass line, it must be forged step-by-step through mass links and tested in that relation.

Three consequences follow from this conception of the Maoist mass line:

—The mass line is not a people’s line. The masses must be understood politically in a dialectical relation to the class party or the class-state—or what is the same: as a collective social force. Classes are determined as a collective social force when their existence is reflected in the conjuncture as a relatively unified movement that transforms the material situation. It is the masses that make history. If one attempts to fix the concept of the masses as a social or structural fact, through the concept of the people, without at the same time understanding the masses as constituting a collective social force, then one has only managed to construct the subjective conditions for a populist pseudo-politics.

Although Mao uses ‘masses’ and ‘people’ more or less interchangeably, the dialectic between the masses as a social force and again as a social or structural fact is essential in order to define the terms of the Maoist break.

—The mass line is not a class line. The narrowly-instrumentalist conception of the mass line as the promotion of a line formulated by the class party in isolation from the mass movement has nothing whatsoever to do with living Maoism, even if most of the small-group Maoist left upholds it today. Mass links are not forged through a politics of propaganda, understood unilaterally—advertising our existence or ‘successes’, holding forth abstract discourses on the existence of the class enemy, recruiting through sympathy with ‘our’ political line, and so forth—but only through a concrete politics that, by consolidating a process of organization at every step, allows the masses to seize their own power as they appropriate the project of the whole. Propaganda, while necessary, must at all times be put into relation with mass work, which at every step remains primary.

When we write, “the mass line is not a class line” we are not covering over the two-line struggle in the party. Indeed, it is precisely when a section of the party takes the class line for a mass line, and then masters the two-line struggle, that the conditions are met for the appearance of a ‘red’ bourgeoisie. The paradoxical task of the proletariat is not simply to take the place of the bourgeoisie (the revolution, properly speaking), but to destroy the places marked out by class society as such (communism). The proletarian class line must always be a moment of the mass line: it can only live outside of itself, around and beyond the class party. Indeed, as soon as the class party contracts its horizon to a simple inversion of the revolutionary type—thus abandoning the mass, or communist, perspective—then it is already doomed to reproduce capitalist society. The mass line is the line that divides communists from revisionists.

—The mass line is not a mass organization line. It is necessary always to distinguish between mass organizations and the broad masses. What gives mass organizations their mass character are links with the broad masses, not the breadth of their ‘points of unity’ or ‘mission statement’ (the very existence of either which often indicates a crudely mechanical conception of unification). A mass organization that fails to maintain links with mass inventiveness can easily become a bureaucratic version of itself and take up its ‘proper’ place in the social order—for example, once the class situation that gave rise to it has been extinguished. It follows that the political organization of the proletariat must prioritize direct relations with the broad masses at all times. In no case can we substitute relations with mass organizations, as necessary as these are, for such direct relations. Only in this way can constructing mass organizations or intervening in existing ones consolidate mass links, instead of serving as an effective screen that divides the class organization from the broad masses.

This is the essential lesson that Sheng-wu-lien draws from the center’s February 1967 order banning the people’s communes (notably the Shanxi Revolutionary Rebels GHQ and the Shanghai People’s Commune) and the subsequent establishment of the revolutionary committees. It is not simply that the RCs were thoroughly dominated by the PLA and party cadre—despite the “three-in-one” formula, not a single provincial RC was chaired by a member of a mass organization—but that the mass organizations themselves were bureaucratized, divided from the broad masses: “If ‘communes’ are established while the masses have not yet fully understood that their interest lies in the realization of ‘communes’ in China, the ‘communes’ will be communes in name only, and in reality they will be sham ‘communes’ essentially the same as the present revolutionary committees in which power is usurped by the bourgeoisie.”

The mass line articulates four contradictory pairs: the class party and the broad masses; political class and social class; democracy and centralism; and knowledge and organization.

We can precisely specify this articulation: The mass line, which develops under the condition of the question ‘Who are the masses?’, names the spiraling movement between the class party and the broad masses—a contradiction determined at the level of politics, and under the

---

domination of its mass aspect—in which the class party organizes and centralizes correct mass ideas—ideas that are born in mass-democratic “great debates” over local forms of organization invented in the struggle—and then returns them to the masses, so that class knowledge (science) and mass knowledge tendentially merge as we approach the communist future.

**Summing Up Experience**

In this task of systematizing mass ideas, we have a weapon at our disposal: the Maoist summation of experience. The summation is a synthesis of universal lessons, both positive and negative, that we draw from experience in order to exit from subjectivism and localism. It is the counterpart, at the level of knowledge, to the question of the party at the level of organization. Both the summation of experience and the question of the party link concrete class situations with the perspective of the whole, the first in terms of knowledge, the second in terms of organization. The summation and the question of the party are related in the following manner: communist initiative on the question of the party must bring the masses from partial and local forms of organization—invented in order to resolve tactical problems encountered in concrete struggles—to the question of the organization of the whole under proletarian leadership; however this passage can only be traversed by undertaking summations that systematize, with the masses, the correct ideas arising from such partial and local forms of autonomous organization.

The class organization must never take itself to be, alone, the maker of history: To systematize, with the masses, their own actions, to have confidence in the masses, to fully grasp that the “popular masses are endowed with an infinite creative power,” is to understand that only centralization of mass initiative will build the communist party. It is our role as communist militants to pose the question of the party through regular collective summations, so that the masses—both the advanced sections who act alongside us in a combative manner, and the rear supports who expand the field of struggle and distribute its effects according to real social links—themselves feel the need for an organization that can centralize their power.

Unification—of the masses, of communists—can only be achieved by regularly summing up our militant experience in a conscientious manner:

1—Unification of communists: If we do not carry out public summations, if we engage in self-criticism only regarding issues of personal behavior, and not regarding the material stakes of our politics and tactics, then we cannot advance, even one step, towards building a Maoist communist party. Too many Maoist small-groups conceive of politics under the aspect of propaganda, as if gathering all militants under a single name on the basis of adherence to an abstract political line—abstract in relation to real mass links—constitutes a genuine process of unification. Whether this gathering precedes ‘ideological struggle’ over the abstract political line, in the manner of the NCP-LC (a split from our group), or vice-versa (our position immediately following the split, see the “Introduction,” above) this conception of unification does not proceed from mass links, and remains purely formal. Unification must occur on the
basis of ideological struggle over a mass political line that develops in the relationship between
the project of the whole and concrete class situations. If such struggle is not grounded in
summations of real mass work, it can never lead to a perspective of the whole, and all militant
units or small groups will remain enclosed in their local situations—even if they cover over this
enclosure through adherence to an abstract political line. It is not enough to engage in mass
work and formulate a political line: everything rather depends on developing the political line
out of the mass work, and this development can only pass through the summation of
experience. Otherwise, ‘mass work’ becomes simply a Maoist name for activism.

Mao says that we must “carefully seek out the advanced experience of the masses in a locality,
sum it up and popularize it.”19 We can only popularize our militant experience on the basis of
summations that systematize its universal lessons for the whole of the revolutionary camp,
which includes communist militants.

This means: (i) we must popularize our summations: if we exclusively sum up our experience
internally, then we have offered nothing to the revolutionary camp—indeed, our work will be
‘summed up’ by the class state. As Mao puts it, we must “sum up concrete experience and
spread it rapidly among the masses so that what is correct will be promoted and what is wrong
will not be repeated.”20 (ii) popularization in the absence of a prior summation lacks material
sense. Those who understand the process of unification as a process of projecting, for the rest
of the small-group left, ‘news stories’ about their group—framed in inadmissibly vague terms as
an uninterrupted series of victories: “yesterday, we led the masses…”—are fantasists. Genuine
summations of experience grounded in protracted mass work remain the only route to the
unification of communists.

2—Unification of the masses: The problem of the unification of the masses returns us to the
fundamental question that Maoist militants must pose at the level of the conjuncture: ‘Who are
the masses? = ‘Who are our enemies? Who are our friends?’ To address this question concretely
and to consolidate the camp of the revolution constitute a single and same process. The role of
Maoists is to support the left of the mass movement in its task of organizing the center by
systematizing with the advanced their actions at every stage of the struggle. The practice of
carrying out summations from the perspective of the masses allows us to verify our slogan of
the whole, in learning the concrete ways in which it is appropriated (or not) by the masses and
to reinforce, and extend, the collectivism of the revolutionary camp by universalizing the
lessons of each particular struggle. The masses must construct the class enemy themselves, as
that counter-force which tries to prevent them from transforming their material situation. The
enemy does not exist objectively in the political sense. However, if we fail to carry out regular
summations of experience with the masses, the class enemy will not be constructed, and
contradictions among the people will prevent the camp of the revolution from crystallizing as a
collective social force.

(Peking: March 21, 1969), 5.
20 Ibid., 5.
What is primary here is not the content of the summation, but its political function as an instrument for consolidating a process of organization for the masses: carrying out the summation *with* advanced sections of the masses allows them to grasp their efforts at mastering concrete militant situations in terms of the need for an organization of the whole—that is, in terms of the need for a *party*. We must conceive of even supposedly ‘minor’ tasks in light of this political function. Every political tract, every flyer, every poster, every booklet, is a summation in embryo. Maoists must include advanced mass contacts in the drafting, editing and distribution of each item of popular writing. As an example, consider the political flyer:

—Drafting and editing: The drafting and editing of a flyer are nothing if they do not systematize mass ideas that are born in concrete class situations; we must see the production of each flyer as an essential moment in the development of our mass political line.

—Distribution: In order for a flyer to serve as a summation in embryo, we cannot *detach* the contacts who participate in its production and distribution from the concrete class situations in which they struggle—by recruiting individuals from diverse fronts in order to gather them in ‘our’ mass organization. Rather, we must support the most combative sections of the masses in each concrete situation in their efforts to organize the intermediate layers internal to that situation. This imperative is what gives participation by contacts in the distribution of the flyer its sense. If we separate advanced contacts from those concrete struggles in relation to which they are advanced, we only abandon the masses to the forces of reaction.

The summation is what allows the mass movement to link concrete struggles, broaden the camp of the revolution, and resolve ideological contradictions among the people: “It is also necessary to analyze the process of the movement and sum up experience in good time, in order to achieve unity of thinking in regard to the ideological contradictions of one kind or another now existing in leading groups at various levels and among the revolutionary masses.”21 To “sum up experience in good time” means: to help consolidate the camp of the revolution as a unified motive force by affirming that "the popular masses are endowed with an infinite creative power."

Why must *unification* of the masses pass through affirmation of their *infinite creative power* under the form of the *summation*?

As we saw above, if we are to lay hold of the masses as a *collective* social force, then we must grasp the dialectic of social forces between the class organization (as the leading force) and the masses (as the motive forces). Unification traverses the relation of leadership that joins the broad masses to the party. And yet the relation of leadership does not exhaust the capacity of the masses, as is the case with Leninism. The creative power of the masses is *infinite*. This means that it is not circumscribed by any political relation, including the relation through which the unity of the masses as a collective social force is fashioned.

---

21 Ibid., 5.
The infinite creative power of the broad masses is constitutively divided according to its subject, between the masses as a simple self-identity and the masses grasped in terms of their reference to the class organization:

—The masses are never simply self-identical, but must always also be understood through the relation of leadership. It is only through their relation to the leading force that the motive forces are unified in the struggle against inscription in the bourgeois world. The first determination of the infinite creative power of the masses is thus the *unity* of the masses, forged in the relation between the masses and the class organization. This is the relation that makes the *revolution*.

—At the same time, the infinite creative power of the masses is determined through their refusal to be drained by their relation to the class organization (just as the masses as a social force are determined through their refusal to be inscribed in the bourgeois social whole). The masses, seized under the aspect of simple self-identity, act against their relation to the class organization through which they consolidate themselves as a collective social force. The second determination of the infinite creative power of the masses is that the *masses think and act*. This—the principal lesson of the GPCR—is the watchword of *communism* as a concrete politics.

We must, then, understand the infinite creativity of the masses not as an empirical fact, but as a political determination: the infinite creative power of the masses is determined as the knotting together of the *revolution* with *communism*.

The role of the class organization is to make this infinite creative power *live* by serving as a processing plant for partial forms of mass organization and ideas that emerge in class situations. It is not to dream up unprecedented forms of class struggle. In carrying out its role, the class organization must deploy a series of weapons—social investigation, actions, meetings, proposals, summations—in order to systematize the forms of struggle already at work in the mass movement. In this limited but powerful arsenal, the decisive weapon is the summation. Without summing up experience, every battle plan finds itself condemned. Either the sequence founders on the shoals of *dogmatism*, in which the class organization substitutes its own thought for that of the broad masses; or it is strangled by *localism*, in which the class organization subtracts itself from thought, and thus abdicates its leadership role. It falls upon the class organization to centralize and systematize mass ideas and local forms of organization by summing up experience alongside the masses at every step.

What follows are our first public summations of experience. They are the product of nearly one year of uninterrupted mass work and collective discussion.

MAOIST COMMUNIST GROUP
SPARC: DEVELOPMENT AND FAILURE OF A POLITICAL PROJECT

As a result of our work as SPARC, we have come to certain provisional conclusions regarding a series of problems facing both the mass movement in the prisons and the prisoner support movement on the outside.

These conclusions are necessarily limited by the narrowness of our own experience. They are not the product of a systematic investigation of the total situation, but sum up a particular sequence of mass work. Having spent some years on the prison front, we consider it an obligation to share our conclusions as a contribution to the process of unification of the small-group left.

It was in the process of making the errors analyzed in this summation that we have developed from a Maoist trend of thought promoted by a few individuals into a small but functional political unit integrated into a rapidly-growing national collective. More importantly, we have come to unite under Maoism, not grasped primarily in terms of the (necessary) project of the whole, formalized as a list of abstract points—“we support people’s war, we are proletarian feminists, we support the right of self-determination for all oppressed nations...”—but understood first and foremost as a material practice of fusion with the real mass movement.

Origins

Supporting Prisoners and Acting for Radical Change (SPARC) began as a prisoner letter-writing project in Virginia. It predated both the New Communist Party-Organizing Committee (NCP-OC) and the Maoist Communist Group (MCG). The organization also predated our adherence to communist politics. It emerged from the Virginia small-group anarchist left as an informal network whose aim was to provide support for prisoner rebellions against the state.

Over time, certain members began to develop a revolutionary communist faction within SPARC, characterized by a discursive adherence to Maoism. Our political unity was grounded in a shared analysis of the history of the proletarian movement. In particular, we came to recognize the significance of the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent people's wars in Peru, India and the Philippines in the following terms:
—We understood the GPCR primarily as a struggle against the reproduction of capitalist relations of production in the period of socialist transition.

—We understood people’s war primarily as a dynamic and flexible strategy for the seizure of state power, whose applicability beyond the sequence of the Chinese Revolution was confirmed by the wars in Asia and Latin America.

Thus we restricted the universality of people’s war in the present moment to foreign contexts, circumscribing its relevance to our own society to the sequence of the revolution. We located the relevance of the GPCR on the even remoter horizon of the post-revolutionary period. This means that we failed to grasp the universality of people’s war and the GPCR in terms of the lessons they might provide for our own practice, here and now, as militants trying to develop a concrete communist politics. For Maoists, the universality of past historical sequences can only find its sense in the political conjuncture through protracted mass work. We must in no way limit universality to corresponding historical stages in our own work—such that, for example, the universality of the GPCR would only apply to us when we launch our own cultural revolution.

Even worse: we understood the mass line in instrumental terms as a method of popularizing a pre-existing political line, not as the constitutive splitting of the movement of knowledge and organization between the proletarian class organization and the broad masses. We ignored the Maoist assessment that “the mass line allows judgment on everything from international questions to specific policies, because it is an ideological problem. No historic fact, no transforming movement, no revolution can be made without the participation of the masses.”

In opposition to the mass line, we proceeded from a patronizing and moralistic position that we can today characterize as petty-bourgeois intellectualism.

Long before we began to undertake efforts at national organizing, the Maoist concentration in SPARC decided to reconstruct the group from within, as a ‘mass organization’ guided by communist politics. Richmond was selected as the area where this project would have the greatest likelihood of success, due to (1) its political and economic centrality in Virginia and (2) the concentration of prisoner families in Richmond and nearby cities along the eastern shore of the state.

At this stage, our conception of organization building was characterized by a rigid ‘Bolshevik’ formalism and mechanism which involved the prefabrication of paper ‘mass organizations’ with complex structures and strict rules that were wholly disproportionate to the modest level of our concrete practice. This fetish of administration must not only be referred to our anarchist origins as its negative condition—we attempted to counter the anarchist refusal of organization with a voluntarist adherence to an elaborate architecture enforced by near-military discipline—but must be summed up as a misguided attempt on our part to resolve the

---

23 This vulgarized conception has little to do with the creative practices of the historical Bolsheviks.
problem of an unfavorable balance of forces between the broad masses and the class enemy by purely administrative means. In this way, we abolished democratic centralism in the political sense.

Democratic centralism must primarily be understood as the dialectic between mass knowledge and the class knowledge of the proletarian political organization—which is to say: as the mass line. We understood democratic centralism to be reducible to the system of rules that formalizes the mass line within the class organization, as if this system in itself had a consequential political content.

We continued to operate as a faction within a broader SPARC network that, beyond the Virginia grouping of anarchists and Maoists, was dominated by reformism of the NGO-type. Our decision to remain in the network was justified by our refusal to become yet another addition to the roster of the US small-group left. We attempted to wage an internal line struggle with the goal of consolidating the network into a formal organization united around a practice of prisoner-support activities in Virginia, under broadly anti-imperialist points of unity.

This effort was unsuccessful: the reformist politics of the broader network made the forging of mass links an impossibility, and the existence of such links would have been a requirement for the internal line struggle to have succeeded. Our defeat marked the first of many failed attempts to win over the activist left. We have since come to understand that a rupture with corporatist co-management does not represent sectarian excess, but on the contrary, constitutes a basic condition for beginning the real work of integration with the broad masses.

**The Hunger Strike at Red Onion State Prison**

On May 22, 2012, a hunger strike began at Red Onion State Prison involving approximately 45 prisoners. The imprisoned organizers issued a list of demands, including demands for improvements in their quality of life, the right to adequate medical care, access to complaint and grievance forms, better communication with high-ranking guards, an end to indefinite segregation, the right to have third-party neutral inspectors document prison conditions and protection from reprisals for participating in the strike.

The Richmond-based militants participated in the organization of solidarity demonstrations in Richmond. These demonstrations were attended almost entirely by ‘professional’ activists. The broad masses were largely absent. We supplemented the work of organizing demonstrations with a campaign of street-level counter-information that took the form of putting up posters and handing out political tracts.

The hunger strike, isolated from the start, quickly collapsed. We did not draw the correct lessons from its failure. The actual course of the strike disclosed the weakness of the prison movement in Virginia, confirmed the following year by the smaller reach of the Wallens Ridge hunger strike. Richmond organizers came to view themselves as militants participating in the
construction of a Maoist party under a prisoner leadership that in reality had already been dispersed and smashed by Department of Corrections (DOC) repression, and thus no longer existed politically. The most important of these imprisoned political leaders was Kevin “Rashid” Johnson, the founder of the New Afrikan Black Panther Party-Prison Chapter (NABPP-PC).

The political development of SPARC was closely bound up with our relationship to Rashid. Indeed, he was responsible for the first written statement announcing SPARC as a formal organization. Rashid’s work also first introduced us to the possibility of developing a Maoist politics in the contemporary US. For these reasons, it is important publicly to articulate our differences with his line as a part of summing up our own work. This, in turn, will necessarily require a political-theoretical detour from the summation proper.

Prisoner-Led Parties or Paper Tigers?

Our experience has demonstrated to us that the project of building a prisoner-led communist party is impossible for two reasons.

1—The prison system is defined by its comprehensive domination by armed detachments of the imperialist state. This domination has been constantly intensified and extended in response to past prisoner movements. Today, there is simply no way for imprisoned militants to create unified collectives that have the capacity to carry out organizational activity among the masses. A loosening of control sufficient to make such organizing possible could only come about via the development of a new sequence of revolutionary struggles with a base external to the prisons.24

2—The prison is dominated by lumpen ideology. Despite the use of proletarian language in documents, lumpen ideology effectively dominates most actually-existing prisoner organizations.

We understand that Rashid sees his party as an aspirational project that will find its legitimacy in a future “free world” founding congress. However, calling a handful of militants without either a collective internal structure or a mass base a “party” only contributes to a confusion that could easily be rectified by aligning terminology with the real situation.

Most importantly, inside the prison or anywhere else, the party is not built by uniting insular 24 Even arrested cadres who belong to organizations that are based outside of prisons should automatically forfeit any position of leadership they might hold, due to the scope and intensity of repression within the prison system. In large part due to a failure to implement the principle of collective leadership, we have seen many examples where this has not occurred. This has had destructive results for the parties concerned.
small groups. The party exists to centralize and systematize mass struggles. To call anything that does not carry out this task a ‘party’ is to engage in petty bourgeois dreaming, if not outright deception. The party will exist when it effectively synthesizes mass thought and action. Verbal games will not allow us to circumvent this essential point.

Furthermore, in the absence of summations produced by proletarian organizations grounded in the masses, the formulation of ‘party lines’ regarding extremely complex questions, such as the contemporary political significance of the Black Belt and the legacy of the BPP, entails nothing less than a negation of the mass line. For Maoists, editorials by individual militants cannot produce political lines of any consequence.

**Political Prisoners and Social Prisoners**

On a theoretical level, we began to adhere to the strategy of lumpen vanguardism, conceiving of the prison system as a training school for cadre who will later play a leading role in the popular movement as a whole. This strategy—despite the superficially communist gloss given to it by some theorists, including Rashid—negates the necessity of worker leadership over the popular movement and obscures the severe political limitations and counter-revolutionary tendencies of the lumpenproletariat.

The prison is the site of significant mass struggle. However, the prison is not the strategically central site of the political class struggle. The process of party construction cannot begin from behind its walls.

From a strategic perspective, the prison front is secondary in the articulation of fronts, much like the student front. 25 Failing to center the strategic perspective of organizational construction on the worker masses will inevitably lead to serious political deviations.

The anarchist line of negating proletarian leadership has come to dominate the left of the prisoner support movement. This should not be surprising: beginning with Bakunin, anarchists have seen in the lumpenproletariat—with its penchant for violent destruction—a base for social revolution.26 As a result of this, there have been persistent attempts to fuse two distinct tasks:

---

25 Of course, according to the conjunctures—for example, during the early stages of the GPCR, or the first period of May ‘68—the student front can indeed become the tactically decisive front.
26 Bakunin writes: "To me the flower of the proletariat is not, as it is to the Marxists, the upper layer, the aristocracy of labor, those who are the most cultured, who earn more and live more comfortably than all the other workers...By flower of the proletariat, I mean precisely that eternal ‘meat’ (on which governments thrive), that great rabble of the people (underdogs, ‘dregs of society’) ordinarily designated by Marx and Engels in the picturesque and contemptuous phrase Lumpenproletariat. I have in mind the ‘riffraff,’ that ‘rabble’ almost unpolluted by bourgeois civilization, which carries in its inner being and in its aspirations, in all the necessities and miseries of its collective life, all the seeds of the socialism of the future, and which alone is powerful enough today to inaugurate and bring to triumph the Social Revolution.” Mikhail Bakunin, “The International and Karl Marx,” in Bakunin on Anarchy, tr. Sam Dolgoff (New York: 1971), 294.
—Support for political prisoners against repression
—Support for the movement of the prisoner masses

The first task entails organizing support for detained combatants of national liberation struggles and the revolutionary communist movement. This is an unconditional duty for proletarian class organizations.

The second task entails uniting the resistance of workers and lumpenproletarians on the prison front with other fronts (worker, youth, neighborhood, etc.).

We should be clear that the role of communists supporting action on the prison front is never to support prisoners ‘in general.’ It is always and only to support the development of mass struggles in prison under the leadership of proletarian ideology.

On the prison front, as on many other fronts, many militants perform charity work and dress it up as ‘politics.’ Politics is a specific practice that always poses the question of state power as a project of one of the two political classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. If we dissolve the specificity of politics into every kind of work among the people—whether or not that work is expressed in the language of politics—then we effectively liquidate the question of the party, and with it the questions of state power and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

*The Lumpenproletariat and the Necessity of Worker Leadership of the Popular Movement*

What is the lumpenproletariat?

We can precisely define the lumpenproletariat by its lack of class membership. The lumpenproletariat is the declassed refuse of all classes, a shadow cast by the general law of capital accumulation.

As the absolute negation of the proletariat, the lumpenproletariat is resistant to political organization.

The lumpenproletariat is divided into two strata:

— a stratum of individuals excluded from the legal labor market or from economic activity in general, e.g., street-level drug dealers, bottle collectors, pan-handlers, long-term prisoners, chronically homeless people and psychiatric-care inmates. This stratum is the lumpenproletariat in the narrow sense, as indicated by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.*

27 Karl Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," *Collected Works*, Volume 11 (London: 1979), 149. "The lumpen proletariat of Paris had been organized into secret sections, each section led by Bonapartist agents, with a Bonapartist general at the head of the whole. Alongside decayed roués with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged
—a stratum of groups engaged in extra-legal economic activity who must themselves produce their own parastatal repressive apparatus, e.g., drug cartels, organized street gangs and extortion rackets. Members of these crime syndicates share a community of ideological effects with members of the repressive state apparatus: police, professional soldiers, mercenaries, etc. This stratum extends the narrow sense of the lumpenproletariat from the refuse of organized society to the organization of that refuse into a shadow economy.

The first stratum includes some of the most oppressed layers of the people. Individual members of this stratum face severe constraints on their ability to constitute themselves as a social force. Much like the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry, their effective mobilization in the line of communism requires intervention by the proletariat as a political subject organized on the social foundation of the working-class struggle.

Mao writes: “This social stratum is unstable; while some are apt to be bought over by the reactionary forces, others may join the revolution. These people lack constructive qualities and are given to destruction rather than construction; after joining the revolution, they become a source of roving-rebel and anarchist ideology in the revolutionary ranks. Therefore, we should know how to remold them and guard against their destructiveness.”

If they are not put under the leadership of the proletarian class organization, movements of the first stratum of the lumpenproletariat—or of certain other of the most oppressed layers in society, e.g., the poor peasantry—will inevitably gravitate towards ultra-left militarism, anarchism and utopianism.

The second stratum of the lumpenproletariat can, according to the concrete situation, develop a violent antagonism towards the state. This antagonism can, on occasion, serve the proletarian revolutionary movement. However, it is one of the most consistently reactionary social strata and tends towards fascism. During the recent events in Baltimore, street gangs declared a truce in order to disorganize and pacify the masses rebelling against the police.

The parastatal lumpen groups and the repressive state apparatus united in order to protect the bourgeois state against the semi-organized forms of violence imposed on it by the masses.


Much like the police, the core of the lumpenproletariat consists of predators whose existence depends on their ability to disorganize and prey upon the broad masses. From the standpoint of imperialist counter-insurgency, one of the advantages of the unprecedented post-1975 surge in mass incarceration is the role of the prison as a means of continually producing and reproducing this predatory stratum, whose venality and degradation are then given free play to corrupt the working class with its fascist ideology.

Any struggle to organize the prisoner masses under the leadership of proletarian ideology must involve an uncompromising struggle to smash reactionary lumpen ideology. Many features of lumpen ideology—profiteering, misogyny and racism, for example—are shared by professional criminals and the pigs who cage them.

In posing the question of the lumpenproletariat, we must be clear on one important point: criminalization is not co-extensive with lumpenization. To identify the oppressed-nationality working class, who are the most exploited stratum of waged workers in the US, with the lumpenproletariat on the grounds of their criminalization by the imperialist state is a serious error. We must never reproduce—in a ‘left’-romantic form—the white-supremacist fantasy in which the Black and Latino proletariat are imagined to be little more than drug dealers and violent criminals.

*Lumpen Ideology and Patriarchy*

Any realistic discussion of the problem of the predatory lumpenproletariat must crucially pose the question of gendered forms of oppression.

The parasitic individualism of the criminal stratum represents a somewhat more acute form of the patriarchy that, in the working class under capitalism, (1) reproduces the gendered hierarchy of labor powers, and (2) intensifies the burden that proletarian women play in reproducing labor power at the level of the family. The relationship between lumpenization and patriarchy has been reinforced in the decades since the 1970s. The difficulties of social reproduction by proletarian women have intensified as proletarian men—relegated to low-wage, insecure jobs, where such jobs are even available—have turned to self-destructive and predatory lumpen activities.

Just as ignoring the destructive tendencies of the lumpenproletariat is an opportunist negation of worker leadership on the prison front, so ignoring the gender dynamics of lumpenization itself amounts to an opportunist negation of the woman question in the working-class movement.

*Fire to the Prisons or Prison Abolition?*

In the absence of proletarian leadership, the prisoner support movement oscillates between
‘left’ and right opportunisms:

—‘Left’ opportunism centered on insurrectionary anarchism, summed up by the strategic slogan “fire to the prisons”
—Right opportunism centered on prison abolitionism, which takes on an organized form—funded by the imperialist state—in groups like Critical Resistance and INCITE

‘Left’ opportunism limits its activity to supporting violent mass rebellion and carrying out isolated interventions with an adventurist character. Through its failure to pose the question of the party, it effectively maintains the masses in a state of dispersal and powerlessness. However, it is subjectively hostile to the imperialist state. Therefore, our contradiction with ‘left’ opportunism is generally (but not always) non-antagonistic, i.e., internal to the camp of the revolution.

Right opportunism, on the other hand, is a means by which imperialism intervenes to pacify the masses on the prison front through the mediation of the radical petty bourgeoisie as a transmission belt for corporatist NGO programs, ideologically supplemented by identity politics and anti-communism. The intellectuals of this trend—including Angela Davis, Michelle Alexander and Andrea Smith—provide a ‘critical’ and ‘feminist’ cover for capitulation to the violence of the bourgeois class state.

We do not need restorative justice (were that even a possibility) as a new form of ideological power in the hands of the bourgeois state. We do need the proletariat to organize mass initiative and impose its class justice on the class enemy. The call for prison abolition is a petty-bourgeois fantasy of an imperialism ‘with a human face’ that can reproduce the inscription of the masses in the bourgeois social whole without the threat or exercise of violence.

To speak of prison abolition in a world of antagonistic classes is worse than utopian: it is criminal. To paraphrase Lenin: One party in power, the other in prison. We are perfectly content with the knowledge that when they build prisons, the bourgeoisie are constructing their own future homes.

The Limitations of Propaganda and Solidarity in Mass Work

The Richmond organizing group attempted to forge mass links on two fronts. The first was the prison front. The second was the neighborhood front, with a concentration on proletarian neighborhoods in the greater Richmond metropolitan area.

Communication with the Mass Base of Prisoners

We communicated with prisoners through regular correspondence, supplemented by
occasional distributions of mass surveys on prison conditions and the state of the struggle. The information we gathered, along with the demands of the hunger strike, formed the basis of a political program that we drafted and submitted to various prison contacts for comments and criticism.

Given the disproportion between our organizing group (a few individuals with minimal financial resources) and our contacts (nearly one hundred prisoners), there soon proved to be serious technical limitations regarding the maintenance of frequent correspondence and mass mailings. Our communications lacked consistency and focus, qualities that would have been necessary to bring about a process of organization.

These limitations were reinforced by another objective constraint on our relations with the prisoner masses—namely, the continuous repressive action of the DOC. The prison authorities ensured that what communications we were able to relay to inmates were dogged by time delays. As our work developed, the DOC issued a blanket proscription on SPARC mail. Despite efforts to circumvent the ban, communication with many inmates completely ceased. Incipient efforts to develop contacts in women's prisons were quickly abandoned for the same reason.

Efforts were made to disseminate political literature to prison contacts. This ran up against (1) the objective limits of state censorship, making the shipment of books impossible, and (2) the subjective limits of our lack of ideological consolidation around the relation between the project of the whole and our mass work, so that any literature that did manage to reach prisoners was divorced from a coherent process of political education.

Face-to-face contact with prisoners was minimal. This fact, compounded with our technical limitations and bourgeois state repression, conspired to give our political relationships an abstract character. It was virtually impossible to evaluate the material practices of our prison contacts. Among those prisoners whose thought and practice we managed to evaluate, a significant number demonstrated an inability to carry out a concrete analysis of the political conjuncture, the unsurprising result of years spent in conditions of extreme isolation.

We quickly came to realize that we could play no direct role in organizing the prisoner masses. The small and unconsolidated leading group on the inside—already isolated in maximum-security conditions—was ultimately scattered by transfers to other prisons around the country.

**Links with the Masses in Richmond Neighborhoods**

Our work on the neighborhood front at this time featured geographically-targeted mass agitation and public events. However, this was not a regular practice, but a series of sporadic interventions linked to popular mobilizations around specific issues and situations.

We were able to gather an impressionistic understanding of mass opinion from a large number of casual street conversations. However, without a focused and consistent development of
mass links, our work of street outreach could not consolidate political relationships with mass contacts, much less support a genuine process of organization that aimed to transform the material situation. Our arbitrary practice of agitation made the concentration of our contacts—a requirement for collective discussion to take place—a difficult problem.

We made halting attempts to organize against the Richmond City Jail on the basis of its exceptional history of custodial killings. These efforts were effected through a brief period of street discussions with family members and friends outside the jail, as well as research into wrongful-death suits that culminated in attempts to contact the plaintiffs.

All in all, we must evaluate our work on both the neighborhood and prison fronts as failures. This cycle of experience highlights the ineffectiveness of abstract and episodic public agitation and propaganda. Had we been carrying out regular summations of experience, we could have rectified our practice much more rapidly.

Retrospectively, a strategic focus on the struggle against the Richmond jail, grounded in the specific experiences of the masses in our own social context, would have served us much better than abstract agitation around a prison movement within VDOC facilities that was more potential than actual.

Any group of militants attempting to intervene in the class struggle must at once embed themselves in the life of the masses as a consistent presence over a long period of time and concentrate themselves in specific class situations. Moreover, in order for such an intervention to have material sense, it must be grounded in a well-defined site of struggle: a school, a housing project, a workplace....

The Abstract Politics of Solidarity and the Failure to Develop Real Mass Links

It was never clear to the organizers who it was that they were trying to organize:

—Inmates in Virginia prisons?
—Recently-released politicized prisoners?
—Families of prisoners in the greater Richmond metropolitan area?
—Families of prisoners throughout the state?

There was no deliberate and protracted development of political relations with any one group. We even reached out to individual prison contacts confined in other states, without any strategic justification.

The unity between SPARC on the outside and the politicized prisoners on the inside recalls the unity between white anti-imperialists and armed nationalists in the 1980s—a unity whose basis was a shared isolation from the mass movement. We started by effectively taking a small circle of politicized prisoners to be a section of the broad masses. At the same time, we imagined the
very same circle to be a political vanguard in relation to our own organization. The confusion of concepts was immense. The politicized prisoners and the outside organizers came to mirror each other in their isolation from the broad masses.

**National Organizing Efforts**

In the period following the hunger strike, the Virginia Maoists became involved in a national Maoist party-building project. This project, initially known as the Liaison Committee, later—after a founding congress—became the NCP-OC.

This effort represented a merger of communists active on the prison front in Virginia with communists working on the student front at City University of New York (CUNY). The unity of the organization was from the start merely *formal*. This unity was declared in a program drafted at the founding congress, held in April 2013. This program combined formulas copied verbatim from the documents of other Maoist parties with superficial scholastic ‘research’ into the concrete conditions of the US. Some of that ‘research’ was based on information from Wikipedia. The document existed at a far remove from living communism. We must never fail in our duty to carry out a concrete analysis of the concrete situation, and there was nothing concrete or analytical in the organizational program.

The NCP-OC intended to create the basis for a communist party in the US by mechanically generating front organizations secretly run by cadre. Decisions proposed by non-cadre, democratically adopted in the ‘mass organizations,’ were routinely overruled by the secret cadre organization, causing confusion and frustration. This system inevitably led to proposals for absurd “mass fronts” with as few as two or three members. The NCP-OC was just as clandestine in relation to the broad masses as it was in relation to the bourgeois state. Everything beyond the mere fact of the existence of the cadre organization (advertised through published documents) was to remain secret. Cadre were instructed to operate *exclusively* through the generated ‘mass organizations.’ At this time, SPARC became a front through which the abstractly-formulated political line of the NCP-OC was popularized.

The NCP-OC operated as an extreme ‘left’-opportunist, sectarian grouping: *it did not represent a rupture with revisionism accomplished via fusion with the mass movement, but operated as a retreat into small-group isolation.*

The NCP-OC made frantic efforts to compensate for its self-imposed isolation with a feverish intensity of work that could not be sustained.

The organization was premised on an incorrect understanding of party building as a process which occurs at a distance from the mass movement, and which fuses with it only at a later point.30 We failed to understand that *from the very beginning, the party must be built through a*...
protracted process, taken up by the masses, of centralizing struggles internal to the mass movement.

The contrary conception of party building is that of the various petty-bourgeois propaganda sects that compete with one another for a restricted pool of cadre on social media and college campuses. These sects all engage in a more or less identical popularization of a more or less identical abstractly-formulated political line. The tendency of each small group (Maoist, Trotskyist, Marxist-Leninist...) is referable to the field of political jargon, or perhaps to that of political aesthetics, but in any case has little, if anything, to do with developing a concrete communist politics out of lessons drawn from the history of the proletarian movement and militant practice in the current political conjuncture.

The Newspaper: a Project of the NCP-OC

The short-lived People’s Voice newspaper, launched as a project of the NCP-OC, was symptomatic of our left-sectarian style of work: the production of a fake ‘mass’ organ with no contributions from the masses and a frantic rush to produce and distribute it according to a subjective (organizational) rhythm disconnected from the requirements of the mass movement. SPARC used the newspaper as a means of popularizing its existence and political line. We used it in street propaganda and distributed it to mass contacts and family members of prisoners.

A media organ, like all Maoist projects, must centralize mass initiative or it is not Maoist in any meaningful sense. The media organs of the sectarian left, on the other hand, serve to broadcast the orders of the day of this or that General-Staff-without-an-army to the understandably indifferent masses.

The abstract, didactic character of such ‘left’ media is completely contrary to the Maoist, or even the Marxist-Leninist, understanding of proletarian journalism.

As Mao noted in a 1948 talk to newspaper workers: “We have always maintained that the revolution must rely on the masses of the people, on everybody’s taking a hand, and have opposed relying merely on a few persons issuing orders.”

Likewise, the US communist William Dunne observed: “The Communist press becomes a mass organ reflecting and molding the struggles of the workers in the same proportion that these struggles are recorded and correctly interpreted by worker correspondents—correspondents who write of the battles of their class as a soldier writes of the battles which he helps to fight.”

intellectuals are the source of correct ideas (See footnote 8, “On Maoist Practice,” above). It was left to Mao to carry out a decisive rectification of the Marxist theory of knowledge.

Gonzalo remarked in 1968, regarding Mariátegui’s understanding of communist agitation: “The people need their own voice to say their own words. They don’t need for others to say it instead of them. The people may not talk in a florid language, they may not have a polished language, they might make mistakes on diction, but it does not matter. What counts is that the people say what they feel, what they see, what they need. However, we cannot find a daily press expressing the voice of the workers, we can’t find such a thing because the problem, how Mariátegui set it forth, has never been well understood.”

This remains the case today.

Communist organizations and media projects which refuse to systematize mass thought, fail to involve the masses in the means of communication and presume to think in place of the masses have nothing to do with the “real movement which transforms existing conditions.”

**Serve the People Program Revisionism**

SPARC was perhaps best known for the transportation program we operated, providing a cheap means of traveling from Richmond, located in eastern Virginia, to the maximum-security prisons located in the far west of the state—a distance of nearly 400 miles and a drive of eight hours—where most of our imprisoned contacts were concentrated. Over time, the logistics of maintaining the program became the focus of our efforts. Our decision to terminate the program, hastened by state repression, was a necessary correction to the crippling right opportunism it embodied. The transportation program was not a strategic decision made by the Maoist militants on the basis of evaluating the objective situation through social investigation. It was a program launched by others, disconnected from any political strategy or sustained effort at popular mobilization.

The program was driven by a ‘do something now’ type of narrow pragmatism and a desire to demonstrate our commitment to revolutionary struggle by undertaking needless self-sacrifice.

We constantly posed to ourselves the question of how we might use the program in order to sharpen the class struggle, but no satisfactory resolution was ever reached. We briefly attempted to gauge interest in resisting repressive changes to DOC visitation policy, but these efforts fell victim to the lack of minimal political unity among contacts. This lack of unity, in turn, flowed from the right-opportunist nature of the program. The program was never taken up by the masses. For this reason, it became an increasing burden on the small core of organizers.

The technical tasks of maintaining what amounted to a social service program in the

---


34 The DOC changes included a complex online registration system that required proof of family ties to inmates and limited visits.
revisionist tradition of ‘survival pending revolution’ came to displace the properly political
tasks of agitation and investigation as support for autonomous forms of proletarian and
popular organization. The initiative did not support a struggle with clear material stakes, and
thus could not unite the advanced in order to win over intermediate layers in the course of
struggle. Rather, the program gathered intermediate contacts as sympathetic supports for a
non-existent struggle (cf. the summation that follows this piece for a discussion of similar
dynamics in New York City). In this way, it represented a misconception of our strategic task.

The ideological notion that ‘to survive is to resist’ is promoted by revisionists of all stripes,
precisely in order to suffocate the political class struggle.

To ‘serve the people’ means to develop, together with the people, the capacity to struggle against
inscription in the bourgeois social whole. It does not mean providing free services and didactic
literature in the manner of every other church, from the small-group sectarian left to the
Vatican. Our job is to assist the masses in the process of unification under the leadership of the
proletarian class organization. This primarily occurs through combat, not by serving them
glasses of milk.

In so far as the program (1) provided a service in a manner that did not contradict the state
project of the bourgeoisie, and (2) did not arise from mass initiative, it could not build unity on
the basis of antagonism with the existing social and political order. This means: it was not able
to construct a properly political unity.

In sum: the transportation program became an NGO project without funding or salaried staff.

Its operation won us a certain ‘celebrity’ on the activist left, which was precisely in proportion
to its political vacuity. Ultimately, the program came to depend upon a grant from a religious
organization, which was fitting enough.

When communist groups come to play the same game as the non-profits—scraping together
resources to facilitate social reproduction, instead of helping the masses appropriate these
resources from the enemy—they are not serving the people so much as they are serving capital.
The transportation program may have been revolutionary in words, but it was revisionist in
practice.

Serve the people programs treat the masses in their objective dimension, as structurally
determined: they do nothing to support the constitution of the masses as a collective social
force.

The Symmetry of Right and ‘Left’ Opportunisms

Behind the transportation program, there was an incorrect conviction that we could
accumulate forces by combining revisionist ‘serve the people’ programs with sterile and
scholastic ‘political education’ programs. We took up the project as a remedial measure, believing that encouraging the masses to take up the autonomous provision of material services was ‘closer’ to the class struggle than the practice of abstract agitation and propaganda. However, both practices were marked by the absence of fusion with concrete class situations.

Our experience confirms that militants who promote glorified self-help to the people and petty bourgeois intellectuals who promote ‘ideological work’ detached from militant practice are united in their refusal to fuse with the mass movement. In fact, the only political education that unifies the masses under proletarian ideology is the struggle against the class enemy.

*Survival programs and the dissemination of abstract agitation and propaganda form symmetrical right and ‘left’ opportunisms that are identical in their immobilization of the mass movement.*

As the failure of the masses to take up the initiatives launched by the organizing group became clear, we responded by continuing to move forward with the same work-plan, confident that the program might serve as a placeholder for mass enthusiasm which would emerge at an unspecified future point.

At the time, we were too disorganized to carry out a much-needed internal assessment of our work. Thus, we began in isolation from the mass movement and continued to reinforce this separation by failing to wield the most important weapon at our disposal: the summation of experience. A concrete politics can be developed and extended *only* if we sum up experience and proceed to build political unity on the basis of the summation. The summation is what allows us to launch a new sequence at a qualitatively higher level.

**The End of the NCP-OC**

At the national level, the NCP-OC finally collapsed as a result of internal contradictions generated in large part by the expulsions of two members for engaging in consistent patterns of misogynistic abuse. The expulsions were proposed by the leadership and adopted by the whole organization. A section of the New York City branch refused to uphold the expulsion decisions, insisting that both members be reintegrated into the organization. This section split from the organization and proceeded to form another party-building project: the New Communist Party-Liaison Committee (NCP-LC). The NCP-OC then re-founded itself as the MCG, recognizing the need to align organizational structure with material practice.

The immediate cause of the split—the refusal of a faction of the NCP-OC to follow the decision to expel the abusive misogynists—obscured deeper political divisions that had been developing during the preceding period. These divisions form the substance of this summation and its companion pieces. They are embodied in the fact that the NCP-LC continues to uphold the original program of the NCP-OC, pending a later stage of ideological struggle—understood abstractly in terms that recall our conception of ideological consolidation immediately
The End of SPARC

SPARC continued for a short period beyond the end of the NCP-OC, as a mass organization of the MCG.

There was a massive time lag between (1) the realization that SPARC was isolated from mass initiative and (2) the eventual liquidation of the organization. This lag is referable to the investment of time and labor in this particular sectoral concentration—an investment that began prior to ideological consolidation. We were imprisoned by a bureaucratic style of work, characterized by separation from the broad masses, lack of flexibility and attachment to routine.

SPARC was never able to escape its origins as an organization that was mechanically prefabricated in relation to the mass movement. From the very beginning, it existed at a fatal remove from the forms creatively invented by the masses in the clash with the class enemy. It was an empty structure for which we were always seeking a content. For this reason, despite a discursive adherence to autonomous proletarian organizing, SPARC remained a petty-bourgeois activist project, true to its anarchist origins. The common thread running through the life of the organization was the ‘left’-opportunist practice of acting in place of the masses.

The life of proletarian politics is a continual process of rupture with bourgeois ideology. No single break can ever be total or final: “Everything in the world divides into two. Purity is relative and impurity is absolute. The two aspects of a contradiction are united and at the same time struggle against each other, and it is this which propels the movement and change of things.”

This applies without exception to every concrete militant initiative. What was correct in SPARC included:

—an understanding, however abstract, of the necessity for organization and collective militant intervention,

—recognition of the centrality of the question of national oppression in the US,

---

35 "In order to consolidate an ideological line, Maoists must engage in several key tasks such as a summation of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and settling the debate between the strategies of the October Road and Protracted People’s War. While these are questions that will have to be debated during when we reach the stage of the organizing committee, for now we have principles of unity that will be the basis for the Liaison Committee...The NCP(LC) is a continuity of the NCP(OC), as well as a rupture with it. Those who are in the LC today were a part of the formation of the OC, including drafting up its principles of unity. Thus, we will be using the same points of unity- on one condition: each and every point is up for debate." <https://ncplc.wordpress.com/towards-a-maoist-party-a-call-for-communists-to-unite-to-form-a-liaison-committee/>.

—a will to break with the swamp of anarchist disorganization, born out of an understanding that the power of the proletariat is concentrated in its organizational capacity (that is, not primarily—as many on the small-group communist left hold today—in its key position in the capitalist economy).

What was incorrect in SPARC was our failure to grasp Maoism in our practice as a qualitatively new articulation of the Marxist theory of knowledge, defined by the absolute primacy of the creative practices of the mass movement. The organizational form was placed in a position of dominance over the process it exists to serve—namely, the synthesis of disorganized mass knowledge in the light of proletarian ideology. This inversion foreclosed the possibility of qualitative leaps in practice. Immense effort was devoted to operating an empty organizational shell to be ‘filled in’ through recruitment based on sympathy for our political line.

Our organizing efforts had no basis in a living process of mobilizing for or waging struggle. Moreover, we did not carry out collective summations of the positive and negative aspects of our practice. Only by summing up experience and using the summation as a basis of unity can a concrete politics be extended.

Organization is a process of struggle. It is not a chart or a list of tasks to be carried out by ‘activists.’

We founded the organization on the basis of support for prisoner struggles with which we were not in any position to fuse. These struggles were themselves isolated by conditions of extreme repression, and thus had failed to develop lasting mass links internal to particular class situations.

The problem of missing mass links led certain politicized prisoners to an acute right opportunism that identified the NGO bureaucrats and their grant-funded organizations with the masses they claim to represent and whose voices they blot out. For us to follow this path would have meant both conclusive isolation from the masses in struggle and a decisive enclosure under bourgeois ideology. If we do not continually break with both separation from the masses and ideological confinement by the bourgeoisie, our political identity as communists will be liquidated.

At a certain point, SPARC became no more than a pen name for abstract agitation in the mass movement. For example, it was used to sign leaflets distributed by militants at a largely spontaneous mass protest against police violence in a nearby town. As always, discussion—but no lasting contacts—resulted from this.

**Ferguson and the Future**

Following the end of SPARC, there was no systematic summation of experience within the organization. At the same time, the intellectualist deviation of the introductory remarks to the
Founding Statement of the MCG, with its abstract conception of “ideological consolidation,” left our approach to mass work, already disoriented by our retreat from the prison front, contaminated by a damaging pessimism.

Communication that had previously related to the concrete activity of SPARC became detached from any practical trajectory and assumed an even more abstract proselytizing character.

At this time, we become involved in planning the street response to the non-indictment of Darren Wilson in a ‘united front’ with petty-bourgeois activist forces. We were able to consolidate a small contingent under our leadership, which managed to steer the first street demonstration towards a greater antagonism with the state.

However, this intervention remained confined to the limits of a defense of popular violence and an abstract call to revolution. There was no concrete directive that might be taken up by the masses as a guide for transformation of the immediate material situation.

**The Struggle of the Prisoner Masses Must Be a Struggle for Political Power**

Despite a noticeable increase in political instability, whose beginnings coincide with the deepening of the Great Recession in 2008—visible in a series of mass revolts: Occupy, Ferguson, Baltimore—bourgeois mastery of the class struggle remains secure. In the context of dispersed mass revolts, a series of struggles on the prison front have stood out as significant. These prison struggles have included major actions in Georgia, California and Alabama.

However, it is clear from these actions that the prisoner masses are in no position to enforce the fulfillment of their various immediate demands, lacking the capacity to establish political power inside the prison. Only the organization of the prisoner masses as a social force, united under proletarian leadership, will allow the masses to impose their demands on both the pigs and the lumpen gangs.

This in turn must involve smashing the bourgeois monopoly of violence over the prisons. The prisoner masses certainly cannot accomplish this task in isolation, due to the ease with which the enemy can encircle and suppress even the most combative elements among them.

This isolation must therefore be broken.

To this end, there must be a real unification of the masses on the prison front with those on the worker, neighborhood and youth fronts. The process of unification can only proceed if we sum up and exchange our experiences carrying out protracted mass work on particular fronts. Only such a unity will meet the conditions for consolidating an organized revolutionary camp that can force the enemy to retreat, exact a just price for every act of bourgeois state repression and intervene in support of resistance on the prison front.
Abstract agitation and logistical support for the prison struggle does nothing by itself to crystallize such a process of unification.

Currently, we are engaged in social investigation on the neighborhood and youth fronts with the aim of carrying out a new sequence of protracted mass work, taking in hand the lessons we have drawn from this concluded sequence.

Just as the only real support for the masses in India, Kurdistan or Turkey must pass through organization of the masses in our own countries, so the only real support for prison struggles must begin with organization of the masses outside the prisons, where we have the capacity to carry out protracted mass work. Beyond this, we have little to offer imprisoned comrades but impotent and isolated displays of solidarity. Such displays are nothing in relation to the concentrated repressive force of the bourgeois class enemy.

MAOIST COMMUNIST GROUP
Richmond, Virginia
A BEGINNING:
FORGING LINKS WITH THE MASSES IN A POPULAR NEIGHBORHOOD

This text marks an initial effort to put into practice the principle: “Genuine summations of experience grounded in protracted mass work remain the only route to the unification of communists.” Outside of summations of direct experience, the unity of an organization can only be a discursive and formal unity. Ideological consolidation means: (1) local units are constituted solely through personal participation in mass work, and (2) all units carry out a regular practice of summing up experience together with advanced mass contacts. We can only construct organizational unity on a political basis by engaging in ideological struggle over summations that draw generalizable lessons from local class situations.

The development of this sequence of protracted mass work in a popular neighborhood can be divided into two periods. The first, from May to August 2014, was a period of agitation and propaganda. The second, from August 2014 to the present, has been a period of social investigation.

The Inception

We made the decision to initiate this sequence of mass work without relying on government statistics or information gathered by bourgeois news agencies.

Today, we can say that it was a correct decision—to make a beginning, without

---

37 This sequence followed a failed attempt to organize a People’s School in the logistics hub of our region together with warehouse workers. As that effort belongs to a distinct sequence with its own inception, development and lessons, it must be the subject of a separate summation. We have continued to develop protracted mass work in that geographical area through an intervention on the worker front—the first in our organization—by what is now a separate unit of the MCG. The site of the intervention is a large workplace dominated by oppressed-nationality women, triply oppressed: as workers, as members of oppressed nationalities and as women. The local MCG unit has supported the formation of a workers’ struggle committee over a period of four months. This has led to a sharpening of the conflict between, on the one side, the management and union bosses, and on the other, the organized worker masses. With Maoist support and leadership, the workers have transformed their resistance from individualized protest to collective self-organization aimed at seizing their power in the workplace.
preconditions—one that has led to valuable experience, both positive and negative, from which we can draw the following lesson: only from an organized position internal to a local class situation in a defined territory (a workplace, a popular neighborhood, a housing unit...) can one begin to analyze the social whole and extend the struggle to other fronts of the mass movement. By making a beginning on one front and following concrete social links to other fronts, we can begin to seize the social whole in its real complexity.

The First Period: From May to August

For the first ten weeks of this period, we organized regular distributions of political tracts in the neighborhood within the framework of a campaign to support a politicized Black prisoner in Virginia, who had been incarcerated for nearly two decades and whose release was imminent. Comrades in Richmond led this campaign. We also promoted the writings of this politicized prisoner, which many in the neighborhood connected to their own experiences of incarceration by the white-supremacist capitalist state.

Our activity during this period served positively:

— as the starting-point in the movement of knowledge, which necessarily proceeds from an accumulation of perceptions and impressions that provide us with an imprecise notion of local class situations.\(^{38}\)

—as a means of consolidating the group of comrades around a practical discipline. This is a necessary condition for the development of political work, but we can only begin to meet it by establishing a regular practice that aims to construct mass links. Through discussions of social and political problems with the masses, we were able to instill a discipline around certain practices within the group, including mutual dependability and punctual attendance at all events. It was only after the emergence of the MCG that comrades were able to overcome the crucial problem of lack of discipline. This problem had undermined the practice of the NCP-OC to the point that it was never able to engage in protracted mass work.

However, as a campaign of pure agitation and propaganda for our local organization, this sequence had little to do with living Maoism. Our leaflets promoted a disembodied revolutionary politics by ‘advertising’ our existence and political line. We failed to pose concrete tasks that supported the self-organization of the masses, except abstractly in conversations and leaflets. This period was characterized by the repetition of agitation and propaganda in different forms without any consequential material development.

Agitation and propaganda must always serve a social investigation that has as its objective the

organization of the masses in a concrete situation. Without a deliberate and systematic process of summing up experience, the countless conversations we had with workers, tenants and others in the neighborhood during this period could not amount to such an investigation.

We were still unlearning, through practice, the narrowly-instrumentalist understanding of the mass line upheld by the NCP-OC and by many Maoists in the US today, which conceives of it as the popularization of ideas formulated in advance by the political organization, followed by recruitment to predetermined political projects based on agreement with these ideas.

The mass line is the Maoist theory of knowledge and the Maoist theory of organization. It cannot be reduced to an instrument or a method.

The August 14 General Assembly

On August 14, following the police lynching of Mike Brown and the violent rebellion of the broad masses in Ferguson, more than 300 people held a general assembly (GA) at a park in the neighborhood. Held one month to the day after the NYPD lynching of Eric Garner on Staten Island, the GA was marked by a heavy presence of Black proletarians. The participation of Maoist comrades in this GA marked the transition of our neighborhood work to the second period.

One week after the GA, on August 21, a smaller meeting of roughly 50 participants was held in the same neighborhood park, also attended by Maoist comrades. This meeting was dominated by petty-bourgeois activists.

We must see the moment of the August 14 GA as the most significant of the past year.

The problem we faced was not how to maintain the permanence of the August 14 GA itself—we recognized that GA itself would inevitably vanish in the absence of immediate material stakes—but rather how to organize the popular force disclosed by its appearance.39

---

39 See Adriano Sofri, "Avant-Garde, Travail Politique de Masse et Organisation de Masse," Les Temps Modernes, ed. Jean-Paul Sartre, No. 335 (Paris: June 1974), 2190: "[E]ven when the maturity of the struggle is very low, the spontaneous initiative of the masses expresses itself each time, gives life to a form of organization that corresponds to the power and to the character of the struggle and coincides with it; the march, the strike picket, the worker assembly, the worker-student assembly, the struggle committee, etc. are forms of organization. Born in the struggle, these forms—and others, too: innumerable, more or less important—that the creativity of the masses engender, disappear when the struggle ceases. What survives the struggle is that the masses have won it from the perspective of consciousness, of unity, of self-confidence; but the mass organization itself does not survive; thus, when a form of organization tends to maintain itself, it is transformed into something radically different; either, in its inverted and bureaucratic version, into an envelop devoid of sense, or into a site where a part of those who led the struggle attempt to consolidate its conquests and to affirm themselves on a level that is more advanced than before the struggle. In every case, the direct and spontaneous initiative of the masses and the institutionalization, beyond the struggle, of the organization in which the latter was translated, represent two profoundly and inevitably different realities. To forget this evident truth leads to confusions and to irreparable errors." (Tr. Maoist Communist Group); see also Alain Badiou, Théorie du Sujet (Paris: 1982), 81-2: "Each attempt to durably institute—
However, on August 21, we witnessed the transformation of the GA into a bureaucratic version of itself, motivated precisely by the desire of its petty-bourgeois leadership to maintain the GA at all costs.

We can sum up the farce of August 21 in the following terms: the general absence of Black proletarians, the dominance of petty-bourgeois “people-of-color-and-white-allies” identitarians of a wide range of nationalities, the imposition of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) hand signals, the splitting of the GA into OWS-style working groups without having established a political basis of unity and the silencing of a Black proletarian attempting to speak about his experiences at the hands of the NYPD by an NGO figure who had forcibly taken over leadership of the meeting. A comrade from our organization loudly and repeatedly intervened against this act of censorship, but the moment of genuine proletarian participation—the moment of August 14—had already passed. This comrade was unable to gain the support of the petty-bourgeois activists who dominated the meeting. Following this failure, the handful of Black proletarians on the physical periphery of the GA dispersed.

In retrospect, we failed to properly and fully seize a moment that demanded Maoist initiative—the August 14 GA.

What would this have meant positively? Bringing decisive tasks to the assembly itself, aimed at fusing ourselves with the advanced layers and supporting them in organizing the intermediate layers in the assembly and the neighborhood.

Instead, we made the decision to wait and see how the mass movement that built the assembly would develop over the next week. Some comrades held aloft a large red banner—‘It’s Right To Rebel!’—an abstract slogan from another time, not a concrete slogan emerging from the real movement—while others circulated through the crowd, distributing political tracts produced by our local unit on the Ferguson rebellion and engaging in discussions with participants who expressed agreement with our ideas.

*Failure to concretize our line in the real movement—to remain mere propagandists of an abstract call for revolution in such a moment of politicized action by the broad masses—is an error.*

It did not take long, not even a week, for the popular force of the August 14 GA to vanish under the condition of its inscription in the bureaucratic structures of the August 21 meeting.

Despite our errors, we made important contacts during this time. Together with contacts that we encountered in the first period of our neighborhood work and at the August 14 GA, we proposed a resolution to the problem of channeling the force revealed by the momentary

to *make a state of*—the forms of its creative impatience, changes the mass movement into its contrary. The Soviets after 1920, the Chinese revolutionary committees after 1970 only effect the statist disappearance of their historical appearance... *[N]o political enterprise has a future—however poor its present appears, the storm having been confined to a space [esplacée]—except by being upheld in the sense that the foundational disappearance of the mass movement puts forth*” (Tr. Maoist Communist Group).
strength of the GA in a different way, through a neighborhood meeting titled, “Against the Pigs in Ferguson, Against the Pigs in NYC.” The aim was to advance a process of protracted mass work, to forge real mass links—not to gather once and disperse, or march once and disperse, as if the masses are an object that one periodically mobilizes. Such is the tactic of reformists and revisionists of all stripes.

A few tactical questions regarding this neighborhood meeting arose and were resolved through debates in the following way:

—*The politics of obtaining a space:* against corporatism—no collaboration with or dependence on NGOs for a space. We made the decision to take up a collection to secure an independent space.

—*The means of announcement:* against the lazy method of ‘organizing’ through social media. We adapted our practice of regular leaflet distribution to the needs of the meeting by organizing direct conversations with hundreds of neighborhood residents on the street and around transit sites. We have since adopted the practice of announcing meetings primarily through leaflet distribution. One important result of this practice is that our meetings have been composed almost entirely of proletarian residents of the neighborhood, not ‘professional’ activists or members of the small-group left.

—*The agenda of the meeting:* for an open discussion where the people would be encouraged to “speak bitterness” against the pigs, landlords and bosses, with little moderation and only a brief introduction. This open discussion was to be followed by a prepared presentation. We later recognized this agenda to be an error, as it involved a failure to immediately put forward the project of the whole.

The leaflet announcing the meeting raised the following questions: “(1) What does the rebellion and repression in Ferguson, Missouri teach us? (2) What is the relation of the police to the oppression of the Black nation in America? Why do non-Blacks have a duty to support the struggle of the Black nation to get free? (3) What is the role of the police in a society divided into classes? Has there ever been and can there ever again be a society without police?”

Around this time, we formulated the strategic slogan “*Struggle Committees Everywhere!*” as a concentration of a correct idea already present among the masses: nothing will be won through negotiation, collaboration and co-management with the white-supremacist big bourgeoisie. Every gain will be seized through autonomous organization by the masses in struggle (hence “Struggle Committees”) as they impose their demands on every front and in every class situation (hence “Everywhere!”).
The Second Period: From August to the Present

During the second period, the focus of our work became the continuous organization of neighborhood mass meetings—‘mass’ understood in terms of the social homogeneity of the participants, the fact of residing in the same popular neighborhood.40

From the first mass meeting on August 27 to the final January 6 meeting, the main content of the discussion at each of the six meetings was the problem of racist police terror against Black people.

The mass meetings can be divided into two categories: those beginning with an exchange of thoughts and experiences (August 27 and September 17) and those beginning with prepared presentations (October 1, November 4, December 4, and January 6). (A new series of meetings was launched in March, but as these belong to a new sequence of mass work, they will have to be summed up in a future document.)

All in all, around 100 people participated in the first six meetings.

August-September

Our first two mass meetings (20 and 30 participants, respectively) began with the open exchange of thoughts and experiences. Both of these meetings had the character of consolidating a system of supports among the intermediate layers of the broad masses for a struggle that did not yet exist—or what is the same: for struggles in general, wherever and whatever they may be. Indeed, at times we conceived of the meetings as a forum in which we might cast about for struggles to join. Without any material stakes, the meetings had a diffuse quality, in which the contradictions among the people were on full display. It is only in relation to a concrete project that the masses can unite themselves by constructing the class enemy in the political sense.

We can sum up our limitations during this period in terms of (1) the subjective error of failing comprehensively to put forward our political line in the mass meetings until the end of each meeting (through prepared presentations), and (2) the objective impossibility of proposing concrete projects that proceed from the needs of the masses (rather than from our organizational ‘needs’)—an impossibility that we must ascribe to the preliminary stage of the process of social investigation in which we were engaged.

Despite these limitations, these meetings, in contrast with the abstract agitation and propaganda of the first period, initiated the forging of genuine mass links.

---

The main success of this phase: building relations with collectives of Black workers and students who live in the neighborhood, as well as with individual residents. Several of these residents live in a 300-unit housing complex with a large number of pending evictions.

This phase also led to meetings with tenants in their homes to discuss demands and resolve grievances against specific landlords. In contrast with the anarchist conception of “solidarity networks”—which from our direct experience largely focus on situations of this type, and aim for individualized resolutions of problems through a process of organizing for rather than with the masses—we conceived of these meetings principally as a means to broaden our investigation of the neighborhood. Landlord neglect, rent hikes and evictions will be stopped only by the combative self-organization of the masses. They will not be stopped by something like an ‘activist emergency hotline’ attempting to do the same ‘case work’ as the corporatist NGO apparatus, only without funding.

October-Present

The subsequent phase of mass meetings, each of which began with prepared presentations that clearly put forward the perspective of the whole—the capitalist state, the role of the police, capitalist exploitation, and white-supremacist national oppression—was marked by increasing precision: our political orientation was concentrated in our strategic slogan “Struggle Committees Everywhere!” participants took up and discussed the slogan, and the discussions were centered on concrete issues within the neighborhood—certain slumlords, racist signs in specific stores and particular forms of police harassment.

At the same time, we maintained our regular distribution of political tracts in the neighborhood and participated in various demonstrations in the broader locality against the pigs and the landlords. We did not take part in the regular large anti-police brutality demonstrations that were held in Manhattan during this period, for the simple reason that such demonstrations do nothing to organize the broad masses.

We had developed sufficient mass links at this point to begin involving contacts in distributing, writing and producing leaflets, as well as planning meetings. This qualitatively transformed the content and the political significance of both the leaflets and the meetings.

A single tract written and produced together with contacts who take political responsibility for the work is worth more than innumerable tracts generated by communists alone. Maoists must operate according to the rhythm of the protracted organization of the masses in a workplace or a neighborhood, not in order to satisfy their own impatience or meet the rhythm of the bourgeois news cycle or that of social media.

However, the mass meetings in this phase, like those that preceded them, were marked by open-ended discussions in which experiences were exchanged and different issues were presented before the group. They could not by themselves directly consolidate a process of
organization in response to clearly-defined class situations, since no such situations gave rise in the first place to the meetings.

We can briefly sum up several other important lessons from our direct experience:

1—Protracted mass work, which establishes a direct relation between the communist organization and the broad masses, is a necessary condition of knowledge. The relation between the communist organization and the broad masses must not be mediated by fabricated forms of partial organization—as seen, for example, in:

—organizations that hide themselves within NGOs and the social movement left.

—organizations that orient themselves principally to the ‘mass members’ of their fronts rather than to the broad masses.

—organizations whose existence in the life of the people is restricted to, or dominated by, its ‘mass’ fronts—the so-called ‘mass organizations’ encountered in all of the parades of the small-group left, few of which have organized links to the broad masses.

2—Mass links remain abstract in the absence of a relation to particular struggles. This has two related consequences:

—While the series of mass meetings allowed us to gain a relatively precise understanding of the ideological map of the neighborhood in which we have been carrying out mass work, it is impossible to characterize the advanced, intermediate and backwards outside of concrete mass struggles. A section of the masses may be advanced in relation to a particular housing situation, but backwards in relation to the woman question.

—Outside of particular mass struggles, contradictions among the people prevent the constitution of the class enemy and the consolidation of a revolutionary camp. Communists pointing out the class enemy to the masses—with words, in propagandist fashion—does little to consolidate the camp of the revolution.

Despite the incipient character of our mass work thus far, it has already provoked a politics of repression by the bourgeois state. This has taken the form of an inverted mass line that seeks to separate us from the masses.

For example, at a recent mass meeting, held in the wake of renewed mass struggle against police brutality, there were more than a dozen cops arrayed outside the entrance to the meeting hall in order to intimidate participants. They proceeded to interrupt the meeting. Maoist militants and mass contacts have been followed, photographed, harassed and directly threatened with arrest.
To be attacked by the enemy can indeed be a good thing. However, we must not make the error of taking the fact of state repression to be *in-itself* proof of the correctness of our political line. This must be judged principally by other criteria, chief among these being the organization of direct and protracted mass links in the line of party construction.\textsuperscript{41} To take state repression as proof of our correctness is the ‘argument’ of ‘left’ charlatans and has nothing to do with living communism.

**The Masses in the Political Conjuncture**

The composition of the masses only finds its proper sense at the level of the conjuncture, under the form of *concrete* ideas and *concrete* practices. Our aim must therefore always be to *concretize our links to the masses*. In the popular neighborhood in which we have been carrying out mass work, the concretization of mass links crucially depends on grasping the relation between the struggle for socialism together with the struggle for Black liberation. We can only concretely seize this relation by carrying out protracted mass work and summing it up conscientiously and in good time.

To pose the question of party construction does not demand, in the short term, the immediate creation of party structures. This will remain true as long as the masses are an *abstract name* invoked in agitation and propaganda and the concrete politics of the small-group Maoist left is limited to sections of the student and anti-police activist movements.

However, the necessity of the party must be discussed in every local class situation. The material process of party construction must involve both summations of episodes of protracted mass work in workplaces and neighborhoods, as well as the proven capacity of units to provide leadership over mass struggles with concrete material stakes. Party construction on the basis of adherence to an abstract political line—or worse: on the basis of sympathy for Maoism based on its successes in India, Turkey or the Philippines—can be distinguished from the revisionist strategy of left regroupment only by its narrower set of principles.

With our most recent mass meeting, marked by the consolidation of proletarians from the neighborhood into our political work, we have entered a new phase, which must be summed up in the future. *In this phase, we are beginning to overcome the subjective errors and objective limitations outlined in this summation.* This opening of this phase has been characterized by the *formation of comrades* out of advanced mass contacts who had not previously been involved in political activism. The introduction of advanced contacts into our work has been accompanied by the emergence of the Struggle Committees Initiative (SCI) as a political reality. Going forward, we must ensure that the continued development of the SCI is accompanied by a

deepening of existing roots and the laying down of new roots in ways that promote our fusion with the broad masses.42

As a result of our lack of publications over the past year, we have often encountered the following question from 'left observers': *is your organization defunct?*

In our view, this question rests on incorrect premises regarding the central and secondary tasks of the moment. We exist at the level of organization appropriate to the political tasks we face. Step-by-step with the broad masses, we advance toward the next sequence. We do not aim to construct a false unity based on fidelity to the proper name *Mao* or on sympathy with an abstractly-formulated political line. Rather, we are engaged in a process of building concrete political unity in the line of party construction. Only in this way can we meaningfully intervene in the life of the masses as we aim to transform their material situations alongside them in struggle.

**MAOIST COMMUNIST GROUP**

*New York City*

---

42 For a video of excerpts from an SCI meeting, please see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsemXOtCFXQ/>. 