

# Prologue to the Study of the Mass Line

## A letter to Mike Ely about a planned discussion of the mass line on Kasama

[In December 2009 Mike Ely of the Kasama Project sent me an email asking for advice about a discussion of the mass line that he was planning to initiate on the Kasama website. Below is his inquiry and my response. Mike did not reply to my letter, but it is clear from the various comments on the mass line posted on the Kasama site since then that he and the others there do not agree with what I wrote here. –Scott H.]

**From: mike ely** On: 12/21/09 8:16 AM

Hey Scott,

I'm planning to start writing on the mass line, and its importance for communist regroupment.

Obviously your resources are a huge help. But I thought I would also just ask your advice...

what are the five most important pieces to read (and promote)?

Where have you written about the key issues?

What are key controversies that you think any writings should clarify?

What should I be asking and thinking about -- that may not have occurred to me?

I look forward to your help (though this project may unfold over months).

Mike E

### **My response, also from Dec. 21, 2009:**

Hi Mike,

I'll eventually answer your specific questions below, once I have a framework to do so. But I suppose I am setting out to write a fairly extensive prolegomena to the study of the mass line here!

One of the biggest problems in talking about the mass line is that there are many different conceptions *already out there* of what it is all about. Strangely enough, however, both within the Maoist movement and outside of it (including within Sinologist circles) this multitude of different conceptions of what the mass line is is very seldom recognized or taken seriously. Everybody seems to *jump to the conclusion* that their own initial notion of it is the correct notion

and the notion that everyone else shares (or at least should share). If someone were setting out to write a historical treatise on how the term has been used over the past 75 years, including in different countries, then all these various conceptions would have to be mentioned. And I suppose in that case there would be no “right” or “correct” view about what the mass line is, and no “wrong” or “incorrect” views. (This is the lexical semantics approach that modern dictionary makers try to use.)

But it has seemed to me that as Maoists we ourselves have the obligation to put forward *Mao’s conception* of what the mass line is all about. That is, we have the obligation to champion one particular conception of the mass line, and specifically the conception that Mao put forward. That means we have to start with and maintain a focus on *Mao’s writings*. And given that even in China there were very different conceptions of the mass line (such as those by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping—which I discuss in Chapter 37 of my mass line book), we have to be very careful even with writings about the mass line by other CCP members and even with official documents of the CCP in cases where Mao did not write those documents. In particular, we have to be very careful with CCP Congress documents which talk about the mass line since these were often written by Liu or Deng and often reflect their views more than they do Mao’s.

The fact is that even the CCP didn’t fully grasp or completely implement the notion of the mass line that Mao put forth. The proof of that is that Mao had to constantly talk about the mass line, and continually clarify and refine it over the years to combat a large number of misconceptions, both populist-rightist and anti-democratic “left” misconceptions.

The problem though in learning what Mao’s own conception of the mass line is, is that he himself never wrote a complete and final treatise on the subject. He first broached the topic in a major way in his 1943 essay “Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership”. In that essay he does bring out the core concept of the mass line in the name he himself was using for it at the time: the leadership method of “from the masses, to the masses”. But there are many important aspects of the mass line method that Mao did not discuss in that essay. For example, he does not make clear there that this is not simply repeating to the masses what we hear from the masses, in a populist fashion. Later on, in many separate places, he clarified this with his apt analogy of the party as a factory processing the ideas of the masses and turning out a finished product. In doing so he brought out the role of Marxism-Leninism in doing this processing (sifting and winnowing), as well as the role of the scientific investigation of the objective situation in doing so.

So the painful fact is that one *cannot* learn Mao’s full conception of the mass line by reading any one of his essays, or even by reading section XI on the mass line of the *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (which is the source of the initial conception for most Maoists). The full Maoist conception of the mass line can only be gleaned directly from him through a systematic study of his writings. However, I have tried to sum that all up in my mass line book. The first initial summation occurs in Chapter 3, “A Quick Overview of the Mass Line”. But all the points are further discussed and elaborated in later chapters.

## **The Importance of Contrasting Mao's Conception of the Mass Line with Other Conceptions**

But I've found that you can't simply summarize Mao's conception of the mass line and expect most people to then completely understand it. They still bring too much baggage with them, too much of their initial conception of what the mass line is all about that goes against Mao's conception. In other words, they always still *interpret* Mao's writings on the topic (or any short summation of them) in light of their own initial notion of what the mass line is all about.

Of course, according to Marxist epistemology, this is how everybody proceeds almost all the time. We try to understand new things in light of what we already know. Everyone tries to interpret new ideas and concepts partially in terms of what they already know or believe. In most cases the new must be compatible with the old, must mesh with it. And it is always a struggle to fully accept and adopt new ideas which involve the abandonment of some old ideas. But it has taken me decades to understand just how difficult this process is for people when it comes to understanding and adopting Mao's conception of the mass line which generally conflicts with their initial biases.

Thus it is critically important in propagating Mao's conception of the mass line to constantly contrast it with the most likely misconceptions that people seem to have. The first of these is bourgeois populism. The opposite misconception is what I call the sectarian-dogmatist interpretation of the mass line.

I explore these two major ways of going wrong, and contrast them with Mao's conception of the mass line, in Chapter 4 of my book. However, I'm not sure how successful that chapter is. Perhaps it is too abstract. It does seem to me that the chart, "Three Interpretations of the Mass Line", at the end of that chapter is pretty straightforward though. At any rate, I've never discussed the mass line with anybody who seemed to truly understand what I was getting at in that chapter. In verbal discussions, even after doing my best to contrast the two main ways of going wrong with the Maoist interpretation of the mass line, I find that people still lean towards one misconception or the other. In our old Single Spark Collective, for example, which was supposedly formed on the basis of full agreement on the issue of the mass line, it always seemed to me that the other folks leaned a bit toward a bourgeois populist misconception. Thus they did not find it difficult to shift into the FRSO orbit.

Anyway, if you are going to write extensively about the mass line, I strongly urge you to constantly contrast your views with other possible conceptions—and in particular with those of the FRSOs in one direction, and with the RCP in the other direction. These days we also need to contrast Mao's view of the mass line with the very different views in India and Nepal.

## **The Tendency to Confuse the Mass Line Properly Speaking with Having a Mass Perspective**

One of the most common misconceptions of the mass line in this country, and around the world, is that it is the same thing as what I call having a mass perspective. Here is how I summarize the differences between the two on massline.info:

The **mass line** is the primary method of revolutionary leadership of the masses, which is employed by the most conscious and best organized section of the masses, the proletarian party. It is a reiterative method, applied over and over again, which step by step advances the interests of the masses, and in particular their central interest within bourgeois society, namely, advancing towards proletarian revolution. Each iteration may be viewed as a three step process: 1) gathering the diverse ideas of the masses; 2) processing or concentrating these ideas from the perspective of revolutionary Marxism, in light of the long-term, ultimate interests of the masses (which the masses themselves may sometimes only dimly perceive), and in light of a scientific analysis of the objective situation; and 3) returning these concentrated ideas to the masses in the form of a political line which will actually advance the mass struggle toward revolution. Because the mass line starts with the diverse ideas of the masses, and returns the concentrated ideas to the masses, it is also known as the method of “from the masses, to the masses”. Though implicit in Marxism from the beginning, the mass line was raised to the level of conscious theory primarily by Mao Zedong.

A **mass perspective** is a point of view regarding the masses which recognizes: 1) That the masses are the makers of history, and that revolution can only be made by the masses themselves; 2) That the masses must come to see through their own experience and struggle that revolution is necessary; and 3) That the proletarian party must join up with the masses in their existing struggles, bring revolutionary consciousness into these struggles, and lead them in a way which brings the masses ever closer to revolution. A mass perspective is based on the fundamental Marxist notion that a revolution must be made by a revolutionary people, that a revolutionary people must develop from a non-revolutionary people, and that the people change from the one to the other through their own revolutionizing practice.

The *relation* between the mass line and a mass perspective is simply that only those with a mass perspective will see much need or use for the mass line. It is possible to have some notion of the mass line technique, and yet fail to give it any real attention because of a weak mass perspective. On the other hand, it is also possible to have a mass perspective and still be more or less ignorant of the great Marxist theory of the mass line.

The mass line and a mass perspective are nevertheless best viewed as intimately related, as integrated aspects of the Marxist approach toward the masses and revolution. I have found the most felicitous phrase for both aspects together is “the mass line and its associated mass perspective”.

The trouble with *identifying* the mass line with having a mass perspective is that it downplays or even totally forgets *the mass line method of leadership*, the “from the masses, to the masses” part. Thus there is a strong tendency for those who don’t actually involve themselves in trying to lead the masses in *mass activity* directed against the enemy, to play down the mass line as a method of leadership and to focus only on the necessity of having a mass perspective. (The RCP, though, does this in a weirder way!)

All Marxists have always recognized that it is the masses who are the makers of history. Mao added something *more* to that, a method of leadership of the masses in struggle. And what Mao added is what he originally called the method of “from the masses, to the masses”, and which came to be called the mass line.

There are two choices at this point: We can decide that the *core* of the mass line is the method of “from the masses, to the masses”, or we can decide to *identify* the mass line with that leadership method, and to refer to the other related principles as “having a mass perspective”. I thought about those alternatives long and hard and decided that the second alternative is by far the best. True, much of the world (including even in Mao’s China) chose the first alternative. But the result was that the supposedly “core” leadership principle of “from the masses, to the masses” kept getting neglected and even lost entirely. That’s why the first alternative has turned out to be a very bad one.

In our own past discussions on the mass line, from a few years ago, it seemed to me that you were also pretty much identifying the concept of the mass line with the idea that the masses are the makers of history. I tried to struggle with you on that point, but I don’t think I was successful. I think this is the most important single thing for you to change your position on with regard to talking about the mass line.

### **The RCP Conception of the Mass Line**

It took me several decades to understand what was really going on with the RCP conception of the mass line. (I’m a slow learner!) I’ve always approved of the formal definition that the RCP gives of the mass line. In the July 1978 issue of (the old) *Revolution*, they wrote: “[The] mass line means taking up the ideas of the masses in light of Marxism and the long-term interests of the masses, and in this way concentrating what is correct and returning it to the masses in the form of policies they can grasp as their own.” Not a bad short summary! And here is their complete discussion of it from their [current] so-called “Draft Programme”:

The *mass line* is the method through which the party both learns from and leads the masses. The party takes the ideas of the masses and concentrates these ideas into a more fully correct and all-sided view of reality. It then returns that synthesis to the masses in the form of line and policies, winning the masses to take these up and uniting with the masses to carry them out. This is a key tool in welding the unity of the party and the masses to advance the proletariat’s revolutionary struggle. [pp. 28-29]

#### **The Mass Line**

The mass line is the method through which the party both learns from and leads the masses. To apply the mass line means to seek out and learn from the ideas of the masses and to apply the science of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism to concentrate what is correct in these ideas, distilling and synthesizing them into a more all-sided and correct reflection of reality and what must be done to change it. The party then takes this back to the masses in the form of line and policies, works to win the people to take these up, and unites with the masses to carry them out...summing up the results and then repeating the process.

The mass line is an ongoing process which links theory with practice and the vanguard with the masses in an ever-deepening way—all in the service of the masses’ fundamental revolutionary interests. [p. 37]

It was long a mystery to me how the Party could say good things like this, that I fully agreed with, and then seldom if ever put them into practice. I’ve often challenged RCP members to give “just one good example” of how they’ve used the mass line any time in their history, an example which involves learning from the masses how to lead the masses in some specific situation, and

then actually leading them on that basis. But the puzzled replies I always received never once included any actual *mass activity!* (Of course, here and there in the history of the RCP there must have been at least a few examples of this; but the point was that overall their members are not thinking in these terms.)

During the debates you moderated on the 2changetheworld.info site it finally became clear to me that the entire problem here was with the RCP conception of what *leadership* itself is. On their conception, there is no distinction between propaganda and leadership. For them “leadership” does not necessarily involve getting people to *do anything!* From my point of view the RCP has a correct formal definition of the mass line, but has little or no actual use for it, since they are seldom even *trying* to lead people in actual struggle. (Since they view that as essentially reformism at this point.)

So the RCP’s real conception of the mass line is very different than it appears to be. While they correctly say that “the mass line is a method of leadership”, they don’t really mean this, since they have a bizarre conception of what leadership is (one that really means what I would call political education).

### **What are the five most important pieces to read (and promote) [with regard to the mass line]?**

There is no good answer to that question. Of course, people should read chapter XI of the “Red Book”, and Mao’s “Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership”. But here’s the thing: They should not think they fully understand the mass line after reading those two pieces. The RCP’s 1976 pamphlet, *The Mass Line*, though mostly of historical interest now, may still be worth reading, and especially Avakian’s third article in that pamphlet which tries to combat rightist (populist) interpretations of the mass line. And, blowing my own horn or not, I would recommend my own mass line manuscript on massline.info, especially the first 4 chapters, and a general perusal of massline.info. Items like Dr. Joshua Horn’s lecture “The Mass Line” are inspiring, but they are not at all good as an introduction to the concept of what the mass line is all about.

But the truth is that there are no really good, short introductions to the mass line available (at least as Mao understood the term). The FRSO documents are poor (rightist and populist), as I tried to bring out in my posted critique of them. The dominant concept of the mass line in the revolutionary movement in India is very screwed up: For groups other than the CPI(Maoist) it means something like “organizing the masses in their own (mostly) legal struggles *as opposed to* illegal revolutionary mass action”. That’s clearly a deeply rightist conception.

### **Where have I written about the key issues?**

I think most of the things are posted on massline.info, except for various letters like this one.

**What are the key controversies that you think any writings should clarify? And what are some questions to ask and think about?**

I think I covered most of those above. I'll try to list them here:

- 1) The essence of the mass line as “from the masses, to the masses”.
- 2) The dangers of not drawing a distinction between the mass line and having a mass perspective.
- 3) The importance of contrasting various misconceptions of the mass line with Mao's conception (and especially bourgeois-populist and sectarian-dogmatist misconceptions).
- 4) Exposition and criticism of FRSO's rightist-populist misconception of the mass line.
- 5) Exposition and criticism of the RCP's rejection of actual mass leadership (and therefore any need for the mass line method of leadership).
- 6) Clarifying at length just why revolutionaries need to work in struggles for reforms, and use the mass line in their leadership of these struggles, but why *also* they must do so in a revolutionary way not a reformist way. (I.e., why they must do so *in order to* be able to bring revolutionary ideas to the people.) This seems to be a tough nut to crack, a very tough thing for American revolutionaries to come to understand. Strange, since it was taken for granted by Marx, Engels and Lenin!

**Wrap Up**

I'm very glad to hear that you will be devoting some renewed attention to issues of the mass line and having a mass perspective! Good luck on the project! Let me know about particular postings, and be assured that I'll always be happy to discuss the topic further with you, or do anything I can to help out on the project!

Scott