

Letter on the Mass Line

With some specific criticisms of the RCP

[This is the greater part of a letter I sent to a friend on Oct. 9, 2007. He was thinking through his ideas on the mass line, especially in relationship to the RCP, and we were talking things over via email. –S.H.]

Hi,

Thanks for sending me your comments!

I think what you have written is excellent and I don't really have much in the way of specific recommendations for changes. But I'll make some general comments anyway, which may or may not be of any immediate use. (If you do wish to incorporate any of this into your critique, that's fine!)

1) Mostly what you are talking about ... is what I would call "having a mass perspective", rather than using the mass line method of leadership ("from the masses, to the masses")—which is just one aspect of having a mass perspective. And I think it is definitely correct to focus on "having a mass perspective" in critiquing the RCP. As I have argued in a number of places, the RCP more or less defines the mass line itself in the way I do, that is, as the leadership method of "from the masses, to the masses", but in practice it actually has very little occasion to try to use this leadership method because they do not have a mass perspective in general. So the big problem is more with having a weak mass perspective than it is with the mass line method itself.

2) I think there has been a tendency in the RCP and many other revolutionary parties to reduce what it should mean to have a mass perspective to just one abstract principle, that *the masses are the makers of history*. Of course that principle is true, and—when correctly understood—can even be viewed as the heart of the matter. But the trouble is that this principle can also be understood in such an abstract and distorted way that it has no practical effect on how a party operates or how it relates to the masses.

In Peru, for example, Sendero strongly embraced the principle but (once the people's war broke out at least) appears to have not actually used the method of "from the masses, to the masses" to lead mass struggles, or indeed to try to organize mass struggle in any way except in support of and participation in the people's war. (They actually put forward the view that "the mass work of the Party that leads the People's War is carried out through the people's army", which is the sort of thing that Mao characterized as the error of having a "purely military point of view".) To my mind this amounted to upholding the principle that the masses are the makers of history in words, but not in deeds.

There is no doubt that Avakian and the RCP also uphold the abstract principle that the masses are the makers of history. But what does this actually mean for them (at least at this point in their evolution)? It now seems to primarily mean that they recognize that the masses must come to support Avakian and his line before a revolutionary change is possible. But isn't this general point of view, that you must *somehow* win the masses to support your line, something that every party of every persuasion—including bourgeois parties—recognizes? If the principle that the masses are the makers of history is reduced to an abstraction that everybody automatically knows and tries to implement, then it has pretty much become meaningless.

3) Truly having a mass perspective has to mean a whole lot more than the simple recognition that the masses must be won over to support your party, which is something that virtually every party and political person takes for granted. In addition to understanding that the masses are the makers of history and that revolution can only be made by the masses themselves, we have to also understand that the masses must come to see *through their own experience in struggle* that revolution is necessary. In other words, to truly have a mass perspective in the Marxist sense, we have to understand that the actual struggles of the masses are extremely important; not because of their typically reformist aims in bourgeois society, but because they are the primary school for the education of the masses about the true nature of society and the need for revolution, at least when communists are there to participate in those struggles with the masses and to help them properly sum up the revolutionary lessons.

I know you and I have some disagreements about the relative importance of the “*existing* struggles of the masses” in this regard, and I would agree that *just about any* mass struggle, no matter how it gets started, has this potential to help us change the ideas of the masses in a revolutionary direction. If we revolutionaries can get mass struggles started around opposition to wars and other imperialist actions, or against police brutality, or around immigrant rights, or whatever, then this is important not only for providing another school of struggle, but also for our learning to lead and organize the masses (which is also essential if there is to be a revolution). However, I still think that the number of mass struggles, and the number of people actually participating in these struggles, that *WE* can organize (especially when we are so tiny and weak) will be quite small as compared to the number and size of those which initially develop “spontaneously” (i.e., without MLM leadership). For this reason, I still maintain that joining up with the *existing* struggles of the masses, primarily in order to bring the “light of revolution” to the people in the course of their actual struggles, is the main thing at least in “ordinary times”.

But, in any case, “existing” struggles or not, having a mass perspective has to mean (among other things) joining up with the masses in struggle, and attempting to change their ideas in a revolutionary direction in the course of that joint struggle. This is something that the RCP has at least downplayed for decades now, and may even have become *more* opposed to in the last few years (since having the masses get to know Avakian is now the main focus).

4) One of the things it took me decades to understand about the RCP with respect to the mass line and having a mass perspective is that their concept of *LEADERSHIP* is really peculiar. They talk about the mass line as being a method of leadership, but what actually do they *mean* by leadership? Putting out a leaflet in the days after 9/11 was viewed as both “leadership” and an

example of using the mass line according to Dolly Veale [an RCP leader]. But the leaflet was purely educational and did not even attempt to get the masses to DO anything (not even to get them to attend a demonstration). It seems to me that it has to be stressed that *leading* means getting people to DO things, and if you are only attempting to get the masses to understand things, you are not “leading” them. Until the RCP members come to understand that we need to *both* educate the masses and help lead them in actual struggles, they won’t really understand much of anything about how to build a revolutionary movement. As long as they conflate leadership and agitation/propaganda there is no way they will be able to understand what the mass line or having a mass perspective is all about.

5) One of the things that really amazes me is how little attention has been paid by our MLM movement to Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach” in this connection. Way back in 1845 he gave the philosophical basis for what our relationship to the masses should be:

“The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. Hence, this doctrine is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society (in Robert Owen [and Bob Avakian!], for example).

“The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionizing practice.” [MECW 5, p. 7. (This is Thesis #3.)]

Avakian and the RCP do recognize in words that they are part of the masses, that they must learn from the masses, and so forth. But in actual practice they present themselves (and tacitly view themselves) as being superior to the masses, and having all the basic answers to the masses’ problems. Thus they see the task as simply one of educating the masses in what Avakian and the Party already know. They do not even *comprehend* that there might be some other task here or some different way to go about building a revolutionary movement and making a revolution!

Marx’s conception is very different. Yes, the communists have some (limited!) better understanding of the situation and the path ahead, but the *basic* task which presents itself is the changing of the whole great mass of the people (of which we are now only a very tiny part), and that change can *only* come through the “revolutionizing practice” of that great mass in the course of enormous and prolonged social struggle. Our role is to be with the masses in their struggles in order to help them be qualitatively more efficient in the summation of their own experiences.

“*Revolutionizing practice*”... Recognizing the absolute importance of that is what having a mass perspective is really about. Our task is to help transform a non-revolutionary people into a revolutionary people, and that can only be done (on a mass scale, at any rate) through the revolutionizing practice of the masses themselves.

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On another matter, how important to the thinking of current RCPers do you think this argument is: “What else is there besides the RCP today?” If this is a major hang-up (as I suspect it is), then maybe it should be directly addressed. Not by pointing out little alternative groups like Single

Spark and the MLMRSG, but by trying to get wavering RCPers to recognize how even a few of *them* might be able to do a whole lot better in their own work with the masses if they were to apply a quite different line.

—Scott