



Preface: This article was published in the Revolutionary Communist Party USA's *Revolution* in December of 1975 and was later reproduced in an RCP-USA pamphlet entitled *The Mass Line* in 1976. The RCP-USA was the biggest Communist Party in the country at the time and would go on to play a role in the international popularization of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism after it was synthesized by the Communist Party of Peru.

Mass Line Is Key To Lead Masses In Making Revolution *Revolution*

The "mass line" is something that is often talked about by communists. But what does it actually mean? How does the Party actually apply this "mass line"? And what is the importance of applying the mass line in relation to the revolutionary mission of the working class? These are crucial questions.

The Programme of the Revolutionary Communist Party, in summarizing the principles of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Tsetung Thought¹ on which it is founded, sets down that "One of the most basic principles of this revolutionary science is that the masses are the makers of history and that correct ideas arise from and in turn serve the struggle of the masses of people. The masses, in their millions, in their daily experiences in class struggle, in production and in scientific experimentation of all kinds, amass great but scattered and unsystematic knowledge. Understanding this, the Party of the working class, in leading the class, applies the *mass line*. It takes these scattered and partial experiences and ideas, and by applying the science of revolution, sums them up, concentrates what is correct, what corresponds to the development of society and will move the class struggle ahead. The Party returns these concentrated ideas to the masses in the form of line and policies, which it perseveres in carrying out and propagating in linking itself with and leading the struggle of the masses, and these concentrated ideas become a tremendous material force as the masses take them up as their own and use them to transform the world through class struggle."

The mass line means, first of all, relying on the masses of people in the struggle, or as is sometimes said, "having faith in the masses." But this is not the same thing as religious "faith," which amounts to a false "leap" away from rational scientific knowledge to a realm which, by definition, is unknown and unknowable to man—and which, in reality, does not exist. The communist principle of relying on, "having faith" in the masses is the exact opposite of this: it is based on an analysis of the real world as it actually is, *materialism*; and as it develops through the struggle of opposing forces—and basically through the internal contradictions within things, in nature and society—*dialectics*.

¹ This is how people who acknowledged that Mao had developed Marxism-Leninism to a higher stage referred to it before it was formally synthesized by the Communist Party of Peru. — CItRSG

Based on Materialism

The mass line is based on the understanding that the struggle to produce and distribute the material requirements of life is the driving force underlying the development of all society, that in class society this can only take place through certain class relations, and that therefore, as the Programme of the RCP puts it, "The history of society (since classes first developed in ancient times) is the history of class struggle. The continuing development of society from a lower to a qualitatively higher one has been accomplished throughout history by the overthrow of one class by another which represents a more advanced form of organization of production and society as a whole."

Through the development of society in just this way, mankind has now reached the stage where it can finally enter a new era in human history. It will be an era where the division of society into classes will no longer stand in the way of rationally struggling with nature to develop production and all of society, which rests on the foundation of production.

Why is it now possible to achieve this? It is not because anyone "wishes" or "wills" it to be so. It is because the material conditions—the development of large-scale productive forces and on this basis, the world-historical development of the modern working class carrying out socialized production—makes it possible. And further, it is not only possible but necessary, and inevitable, that society advance to this stage of communism. To put it simply, capitalism stands as the direct barrier to the development of society to a higher stage and it must be swept aside and fully eliminated.

Capitalism is the highest form of the division of society into classes—a division into a small handful of owners of massive means of production at one pole, and at the other millions of propertyless workers (proletarians), who are deprived of all ownership of the means of production and can live only by enriching the owners, the capitalists.

As the Party's Programme states, "on the one hand the development of capitalism has laid the basis for a life undreamed of in the past, but on the other hand the continued existence of capitalism keeps society from attaining this and keeps the great majority of society in continual suffering...The rise of capitalism, though brought about through great oppression of the people, was historically progressive, because it made possible the development of large-scale socialized production, and more because capitalism brought into being and concentrated as a mighty army capitalism's own gravedigger, the modern proletariat.

"The proletariat is the true creator of large-scale socialized production and the true motor in developing the productive forces in modern society. It is the historic mission of the proletariat to overthrow capitalism and replace it with a higher form of society, to liberate the productive forces from the shackles of capitalism, finally eliminate all forms of exploitation, all domination of one section of society over another, and open up completely new possibilities for the domination of humanity as a whole over nature."

Scientific Outlook

It is understanding this that enables the Party of the working class to apply the mass line. It is this scientific outlook representing the working class that makes it possible to penetrate beneath the appearance of things to their essence, to see beyond temporary and superficial phenomena, to advance with the main current of development and not be swept into side-streams or smashed on hidden rocks.

If capitalism could continue to improve life for the masses of people, or if capitalism were the highest degree of development mankind is capable of achieving, as the capitalists constantly preach, then, of course, there would be no need—or possibility—for revolution. But exactly the opposite is the case.

Objectively, society can only advance at this stage through revolution by the proletariat. But such a revolution can only be made by the determined action of millions. Such a revolution is inevitable, it must and will occur. But this will only happen as the masses—and first and foremost the masses of workers—become convinced of the necessity, of the inevitability of the overthrow and elimination of capitalism.

How to resolve this contradiction—the answer to this lies in the application of the mass line by the Party of the working class. But in order to apply the mass line, the Party must base itself firmly on the understanding that people learn through their own experience, and not simply through "being told" what is correct and what must be done.

Propaganda, while an extremely important vehicle for the Party to lay out the whole situation and the scientific basis for revolution to the masses, cannot by itself develop revolutionary understanding. For that the masses must have their own experience. In relation to that, the role of agitation by the Party is crucial—to organize the anger of the masses over particular outrages and abuses into militant, disciplined struggle, uniting many, not just a few. Agitation is key to unfolding around a particular struggle exposure of the system of exploitation which continually gives rise to such outrages and abuses and to indicate the links between the different struggles against this system.

No Party is fit to lead the masses, nor can it be in any position to determine what must be done and how to do it, unless it continually strengthens its ties with the masses and takes part, together with them, in the daily struggle against exploitation and oppression, and assists them in forging links between their struggles against the common enemy.



Repeated Experience

In order to determine the road forward and advance through the roadblocks on this path, the working class, and its Party, needs not one experience, or a few, but repeated experience. It is not a question of a few "smart people" drawing up a blueprint for "how society ought to be" and imposing this on reality, but of the masses of people struggling to change the world and in the process learning more about it, and the laws governing it, in order to change it further...and on, in an endless spiral.

But the experience of the masses, in their struggle to produce, in the class struggle and in scientific experimentation, does not take place in a vacuum, of course. It takes place in class society. And in capitalist society, along with their monopoly of ownership of the means of production, the capitalists control the media of mass communication, the educational system, etc.

They constantly try to "sum up" the experience of the masses according to the capitalists' own upside-down world view. They preach to the masses that they are dependent for their very lives on the capitalists, who "provide them with jobs," etc.---when, in reality, just the reverse is true. They try in this way to prevent the masses from uniting in struggle against them---promoting instead the idea that "every man for himself" is the natural order of things.

Where mass struggle wrings concessions from the capitalists, they try to picture this as a "gift" from them. They are forever bringing forward new politicians and other spokesmen, who pose as friends of the people in order to rob the masses of political initiative and independent action in their own interests---just as the capitalists rob them of the fruits of their productive labor.

And on top of all this, they use their whole state apparatus---police, army, courts, bureaucracies, etc.---to forcibly attack the struggles of the masses and to keep them in conditions of economic slavery. In these circumstances, in the everyday conditions of capitalist society, it is inevitable that people try various means, other than mass struggle against capitalism, to find a way out of this wage-slavery and the misery it means for millions. But it is just as inevitable that, for the great majority, there is no "way out" except through the common struggle of millions against capitalism.

Regardless of anyone's will, and regardless of the lying propaganda of the bourgeoisie and the influence of its ideology (which exists even within the working class) the laws of capitalism assert themselves. These laws dictate that the capitalists must exploit and oppress the masses of people, and that the masses will therefore rise up against them, until they are overthrown and class society is abolished.

This is why the Party of the working class must base itself on the experience and the struggle of the masses broadly---and not on that of a few individuals. To do this it is important to take into account that the masses at a given time and place are composed of different parts---the relatively advanced, intermediate and backward.

The Party must pay special attention to uniting with and raising the level of advanced workers not yet Party members, who continually come forward in these struggles as leaders. These workers are potentially a key link, a lever, to join the Party with the life and struggles of the class as a whole. In order for the Party to learn and grow, and in order for the movement of the masses to advance, the Party must train the advanced workers in the science of revolution, including the application of the mass line. And it must train them not apart from, but in the course of actually leading the struggle of the broad masses.

Persevering

And the Party must persevere—must learn together with the masses through the course of many struggles and must on this basis develop its ability to lead the masses, through all these struggles, toward the final goal of revolution.

But persevering does not mean tailing behind "at a snail's pace." It means uniting with the advanced within the working class and relying on them to bring forward the broad masses in struggle. It means enabling the masses to make the greatest advances and strengthen their ranks to the greatest possible degree through each battle against the enemy.

Persevering means, in short, as the Programme of the RCP states, that the Party must bend "every effort to fulfill three main objectives in these struggles: to win as much as can be won in the immediate battle and weaken the enemy; to raise the general level of consciousness and sense of organization of the struggling masses and instill in them the revolutionary outlook of the proletariat; and to develop the most active and advanced in these struggles into communists, recruit them into the Party and train them as revolutionary leaders."

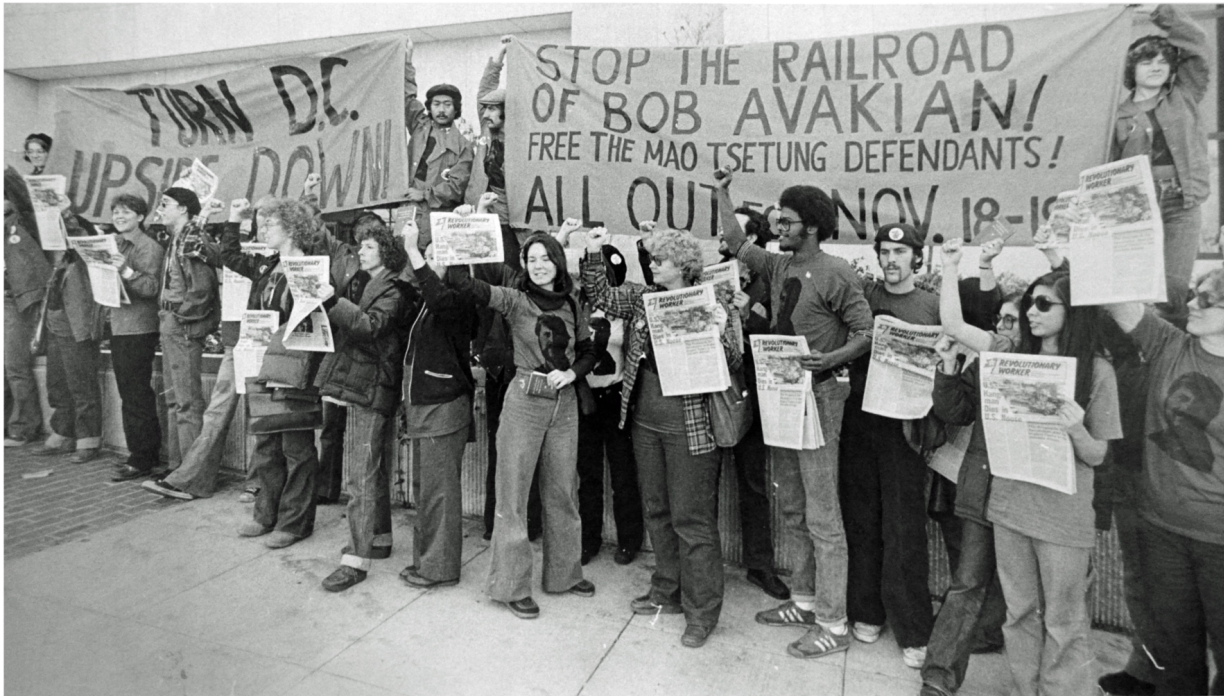
The mass line does not mean that the Party's policies simply amount to holding up a mirror to the level of consciousness of the masses at any time. "Whatever the masses already understand, that is the mass line, that is what we should give back to them"---such is a distortion of the mass line and a denial of the Party's role as the vanguard of the working class, its leadership in the struggle against capitalism. This amounts to giving up the goal of revolution and perpetuating the conditions of slavery for the working class.

The conditions of capitalism do, in a certain sense, and up to a certain point, "unite" the masses of workers—bring them together in ever more concentrated, more socialized, production. And these same conditions do compel the workers to unite in struggle against the capitalists, to survive and to keep from being crushed. But, at the same time, capitalist society also divides the workers, forces them to compete for jobs and survival and maintains other divisions among them—nationality, sex, age, skilled and unskilled, differentials in pay, etc.

And beyond this, capitalist society and the culture and propaganda promoted by the bourgeoisie—which reflects and serves its interests, its position as the exploiting minority in society, as private owners of socially produced wealth—obscures and keeps hidden the basic laws that govern the development of nature and society. Capitalism disguises the basic relations in society, so that it appears that all social relations—class relations—are relations between individuals, between owners of commodities. In particular capitalism disguises exploitation—the ripping off by the capitalists of surplus value produced by the labor of the workers—as an "equal exchange" (work for wages) between the worker and the capitalist.

Living within capitalist society and caught up in these contradictions, the "spontaneous" ideas of the masses are scattered, unsystematic and contradictory. There are the correct ideas which stem from the position of the working class in production, its socialization, and its struggle against exploitation and oppression. And there are incorrect ideas which stem from the ideology and propaganda of the bourgeoisie but which also find a basis in the worker's experience in capitalist society, which forces competition among the workers, maintains a "division of labor," etc.

And more, as the Programme of the RCP points out, "Each worker perceives a part of the reality of capitalism, but none by himself can grasp the overall picture, fully discover the source of his oppression or grasp the laws of nature and society that determine the development of the class struggle. In order to become conscious of itself as a class, and to know and change the world in accordance with its revolutionary interests, the working class must have the leadership of its own political Party."



Role of the Party

As stressed several times, the leadership of that Party is exercised through its application of the mass line. The Party must, as the Programme states, apply the science of revolution, based on the world outlook of the proletariat, to concentrate the correct ideas that the masses gain in everyday life. It must discard the incorrect and, in the course of uniting with the masses in the fight against capitalist exploitation and oppression, struggle against these incorrect ideas which have their source in capitalist society and its relations of exploitation.

The experience of the masses, especially the mass of workers, is the raw material for correct lines and policies. But it is not the finished product, the correct line itself. To develop this correct line requires the application of Marxism-Leninism to "process" the ideas gained by the masses through their experience. It is this that the Party must return to the masses and persevere in propagating and carrying out.

And this is a constant process—from experience to summed up experience (rational knowledge acquired through the application of Marxism-Leninism), back to experience (class struggle) ... and on and on. Further, the Party must not only "process" the ideas of the masses and raise their experience to rational knowledge, but must continually arm the masses themselves with the science of revolution, to enable ever broader numbers to know and change the world, and develop the struggle of millions, more and more in conformity with the revolutionary outlook and interests of the working class.

The mass line is not a gimmick. It is not a question of "taking the positive and getting rid of the negative" or building up what the communists "like" and knocking down the ideas they don't like. The fact is that the experience of the masses themselves are governed by the laws of development of nature and society. Someone might "like" to gain experience living in a capitalist society without exploitation, but there is no such thing as that. The capitalists might "like" to gain experience in smoothing over the contradictions of capitalism, but that is also impossible.

This system will end up in crisis and depression, will produce wars and widespread suffering for the great majority. This is inevitable, independent of anyone's will, due to its very contradictions—and fundamental to the contradiction between socialized production and private ownership that characterizes capitalism. And just as inevitably this system will give rise to widespread struggle against this suffering, against the outrages and abuses that are the daily experience of the masses under capitalist rule.

Laws of Development

This is the way things are bound to develop—toward revolution to abolish capitalism. But revolution will not occur "automatically." At each point in the development of the struggle the bourgeoisie and the proletariat must and will contend not only in the practical battlefield, but also in the sphere of ideology.

There is, and will be so long as classes remain, a continual struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat over how to sum up the struggle, what lessons to draw from each battle and what road to take in order to change with the situation. To the degree that the proletariat, through its Party, does not correctly sum up this experience, does not correctly concentrate the ideas of the masses, the bourgeoisie will, through its political leaders and representatives, put over its summation.

Even where it is forced to make a concession in the practical struggle, the bourgeoisie will lay the basis for snatching it, and more, back. So while the outcome of every immediate battle is important, the most important thing is the growing class understanding, organization and unity built up among the workers in the course of many battles. As Marx and Engels said in the Communist Manifesto more than 100 years ago, "The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of workers." (p. 42, Chinese edition).

There is no "pure experience." In class society, experience reflects class struggle and can only be interpreted according to the interests and outlook of one class or another. The proletariat and the proletariat alone is capable of correctly summing up experience, because only its outlook and interest conform to the development of society. And only the proletariat is capable of resolving the contradictions of capitalism through revolution to advance society to the stage of communism, where mankind voluntarily and consciously changes the world and itself in the process.

This does not mean that, "in one stroke" or through one battle the masses of people will grasp the need for revolution or the road forward to making revolution. As emphasized before, that requires repeated experience, on the part of the masses of workers and their Party, and the constant summation of that experience by the Party to forge and illuminate the revolutionary road.

Sharpening Struggle

But, as also stressed before, the experience of the masses is governed by the internal contradictions of capitalism and the laws of development of nature and society. The understanding of the masses of the need to overthrow capitalism grows together with the sharpening of the contradictions of capitalism and the development toward a revolutionary situation---a situation in which the capitalist system is in deep economic and/or political crisis, the robbery of the workers is more intensified and the criminal absurdity of capitalism, with its want and starvation amidst plenty, are laid even more bare than in "normal" times; when the ruling class is forced into ever more cut-throat competition in its own ranks, and the masses of people feel the urgency and see the possibility of destroying the chains that enslave them to capital.

In such a situation, however, the bourgeoisie, while fighting more bitterly within its own ranks, will increase a thousand times its exploitation of the workers and its brutal suppression of the masses' resistance. And as part of this, it will increase a thousand times its ideological offensive to confuse, split and paralyze the growing upsurge.

Only through the role of the Party of the working class, its application of the mass line to sum up and lead this mass struggle forward, can the working class unite its own ranks and rally behind it the great mass of the people to strike the decisive blows and bring down the capitalist enemy.

But the application by the Party of the mass line is not only a vital question with the development of a revolutionary situation under capitalism. At all stages of the struggle, both in building toward the overthrow of capitalism and in continuing the revolutionary struggle to eliminate capitalism and all its vestiges once the bourgeoisie is overthrown, the Party must consistently apply the mass line. It must do so, both to advance the struggle and to raise ever broader numbers of the masses to the ranks of conscious revolutionaries.

Only when the historic goal of communism has been achieved, will there no longer be a need for the Party to apply the mass line; then, in fact there will no longer be a need for the Party, because, as the Programme of the RCP states, "classes and class struggle will have been eliminated and all of society will consciously apply the principles of communism."

But between here and there is a long, complicated, and bitter struggle—a struggle made up of thousands of battles, of skirmishes leading to major encounters, from one stage to another. And at each stage the Party must deepen its ties with the masses and its grasp of Marxism-Leninism, and on this basis strengthen its application of the mass line. It must do so to fulfill its objectives and tasks as the Party of the working class and enable the working class to advance to the greatest degree possible through each battle, to accumulate through its repeated experience a deeper understanding of the laws governing the struggle, and to develop the consciousness, organization and unity needed to achieve the final goal.