

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE CO-OP MOVEMENT?

During the last eight months there has been a tremendous struggle going on in the Co-op Movement in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Serious questions have been raised on both sides, and no one doubts that the level of political consciousness of all participants in the struggle has been raised considerably. The struggle has developed now, however, to a point where it seems there are irreconcilable differences, where a permanent split with the development of an "alternative" Peoples Warehouse threatens not only the continuing development of food cooperatives but their very existence. Perhaps it would be a good idea at this point to analyze the situation, to examine the contradictions and the nature of the struggle, in order to understand our present situation.

What is the primary contradiction? What are the two forces struggling against each other in this situation that has led to this break? The first explanation of the struggle that most of us heard was that it was a struggle between "working class" and "petit-bourgeois" elements. Criticism of the co-ops ran something like this: The people that are running the co-ops are running them as their own private clubs. They do not stock the kind of food that working people need, but instead stock natural foods that only a full-time hippy can render edible. Is there truth in this assertion? Certainly. But what of it? Don't hippies have the right to organize food cooperatives to supply themselves with what they consider their basic necessities? Isn't this organization itself a socialization of the distribution of food?

The contradiction has also been described as a struggle between worker-control and community-control. This has been characterized as a struggle between a "communist" and "anarchist" position. Certainly it was the workers at the Peoples Warehouse who demanded that the co-ops begin to serve the working class, and threatened to do so independent of the will of the community-owned co-ops. The reaction of the co-ops to this antagonistic contradiction was one of bewilderment: How could things have broken down so badly that the Warehouse and the co-ops would be at cross purposes? Let us examine this situation critically: Is it possible for a contradiction to develop between worker-control and community-control? Yes, under certain conditions. What are the conditions that could lead to such a contradiction? Once the means of production have been socialized it is possible for a contradiction to develop between worker and community control, but this should never develop into an antagonistic contradiction because it is clearly a contradiction among the people.

Finally, the contradiction in the co-op struggle has been described as a struggle between canned foods and brown rice. Perhaps this description more than any other goes to the heart of the matter. Here at last we have a material basis for discussion. Rhetoric and accusations aside, the only concrete changes in the Peoples Warehouse has been their change in stocking canned goods. So, if we analyze

this contradiction according to Mao Tse-tung's outline in "On Contradiction," we see canned goods and ketchup as the rising force defeating brown rice, anarchists and community-control.

To broaden the base of the Co-op Movement is a good and progressive idea. To sell foods that are necessities for working people is an important step in broadening this base. To combat petit-bourgeois ideas and styles of work is necessary before we can put forward proletarian ideas and a proletarian style of work. But to do all this by developing an antagonistic contradiction among the people, to do this at the risk of destroying a Co-op Movement developed by the people to satisfy their real needs, seems to be "Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder."

Let us examine this situation still more closely. The slogan raised by the Co-op Organization during the struggle was: "Criticism - Struggle - Transformation." By itself, this slogan is high-handed and dogmatic. If someone is doing something that you disagree with, you generally don't just walk up to him and criticize him, then struggle with him, and then try to transform him. To do so would run counter to common sense. It assumes that the person would be able to make an immediate leap of faith to your point of view or that he would dogmatically accept your viewpoint as valid.

Mao Tse-tung deals with this problem decisively in his essay, "On The Correct Handling Of Contradictions Among The People:"

The only way to settle questions of an ideological nature or controversial issues among the people is by the democratic method, the method of discussion, of criticism, of persuasion and education, and not by the method of coercion or repression.

This democratic method of resolving contradictions among the people was epitomized in 1942 in the formula "unity, criticism, unity." To elaborate, it means starting from the desire for unity, resolving contradictions through criticism or struggle and arriving at a new unity on a new basis. In our experience this is the correct method of resolving contradictions among the people. In 1942 we used it to resolve contradictions inside the Communist Party, namely, the contradictions between the dogmatists and the great majority of the membership, and between dogmatism and Marxism. The "Left" dogmatists had resorted to the method of "ruthless struggle and merciless blows" in inner-Party struggle. This method was incorrect. In criticizing "Left" dogmatism, we discarded this old method and adopted a new one, that is, one of starting from the desire for unity, distinguishing between right and wrong through criticism or struggle and arriving at a new unity on a new basis. . . . The essential thing is to start from the desire for unity. For without this desire for unity, the struggle is certain to get out of hand.

Earlier, in "Rectify the Party's Style of Work" (February 1, 1942) Mao wrote:

. . . our aim in exposing errors and criticizing shortcomings, like that of a doctor curing a sickness, is solely to save the patient and not to doctor him to death. . . . In treating an ideological or a political malady, one must never be rough and rash but must adopt the approach of "curing the sickness to save the patient" which is the only correct and effective method.

What can be done now to correct the "Left Dogmatic" error in our criticism of the Co-op Movement? All communists, progressive people and people concerned about the future of the Co-op Movement should re-examine the differences existing in the Co-ops on the basis of "Unity, Criticism, Unity."

What was the unity that led to the original formulation and organization of the co-ops? Certainly there were elements of Bourgeois Idealism and Bourgeois Individualism; in a Bourgeois society it would be hard to imagine a social organization where these elements would not be somewhat present. But these were not the principal aspects that led to the development of the co-ops. The young men and women who began the original organizing for the Co-op Movement were people who had served a long apprenticeship together in the Civil Rights and Anti-War Movements. Their life-style, though it certainly seemed abrasive to most working people, was obviously the conclusion to the problem of their material condition. It was actually quite similar, in its style of dress and transient sleeping arrangements, to the young Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tse-tung and Ho Chi Minh. The progressive aspects, the rising force in their contradiction with bourgeois society was their optimism and confidence that a new world could be built within the crumbling architecture of the old. They gave concrete and material form to theories about socialism and communism in their practice of cooperation and democracy. Surely here there is a basis for establishing unity.

What, then, is there to criticize? The Co-op Movement has been five years in development. During the height of the Viet Nam War contradictions were clear and apparent. The Co-ops served as the safe rear-guard and base for the Anti-War Movement. When the War ended, when the very dramatic antagonistic contradiction between U. S. Imperialism and the Vietnamese people was finally resolved in favor of the Vietnamese people, then it was natural and necessary for us to turn our attention to building our own revolution. Certain habits of work and modes of thought that had been acceptable during the period of "United Struggle Against U. S. Imperialism" now, quite correctly, became targets of criticism. A kind of Petit-Bourgeois Idealism had been developing in the Co-op Movement right alongside the more progressive characteristics. This Petit-Bourgeois Idealism manifested itself in various ways: in the attitude that we were right in doing our own thing and that anyone who couldn't "get into" brown rice and buckwheat groats obviously wasn't serious about making a revolution; or, that our stores were democratic because we held community meetings, even though we were the only ones who attended these meetings; or, if we just let it happen "organically" (without any conscious plan or ideology) eventually we'll turn everybody on. These are serious errors in thinking, but they should be corrected in a democratic way through discussion and education, and discussion should begin by re-establishing the original basis for unity that led to the organization of the co-ops.

A new unity is then possible on a new basis. Certainly the prospect of all the co-ops struggling against capitalism and the Bourgeois Ruling Class is to be preferred over the prospect of continuing struggle within the Co-op Movement and among the people.

What are the steps, then, that should be taken to correct the "Left Dogmatic" errors within the Co-op Movement?

William Hinton, in his book Fanshen, details the political development of one little town, Long Bow Village, during the progress of the Chinese Revolution in 1946. At one point the young members of the Chinese Communist Party in charge of the fanshen (overturning) went too far. Chairman Mao had become alarmed and exclaimed: "This is a more serious problem than U. S. Imperialism. U. S. Imperialism is only a paper tiger, but if 26 middle peasants are dispossessed, where will all this end?" The Chinese Communist Party sent down directives that all members of the Party must do public criticism and self-criticism. They must hold public meetings and invite all the people to criticize their actions. This meant that all members of the Party had to publicly acknowledge their identity. This was a very serious step. Hinton: "With Kuomintang assassins still roaming the countryside, with the Civil War battlefront still only a hundred miles away, with a massive counter-attack still under preparation by Nationalist generals, who could guarantee the life of a Communist?" And, yet, they did it, and because they did it the revolution moved forward. They constructed a "gate" through which each Communist had to pass. They stood in the gate, one at a time, and accepted criticism for their actions. Only after the entire village was satisfied that their self-criticism was sincere and they had a true desire to serve the people of the village were they allowed to pass through the gate.

Should we not also have public criticism and self-criticism of our leading cadres? Time and time again during the past few months our "left" cadres have acted in a high-handed and dogmatic manner, and, yet, time and time again the masses of people have supported them, forgiving their rudeness and contempt. The masses of people have supported these cadres because they know the intention of these cadres is to serve the working class. But now is it not time to unite all these progressive forces?

"To make sure that we will not lead our Revolution astray but will achieve positive success, we must pay attention to uniting our real friends to attack our real enemies." Mao Tse-tung, 1946

Would it not be wise for our leading cadre to convene a meeting of the P. R. B. (Policy and Review Board) for the purpose of conducting public criticism and self-criticism?

Ed Felen 11/19/75