

COG's RACISM - A RESPONSE TO MSU & PWOC

June, 1980

As we understand it, MSU and PWOC made several interrelated points regarding our original position and our first response to the criticism of COG at the OCIC Labor Day Conference. MSU summarizes its criticism by stating that COG's acceptance of the first criticisms was "more quantitative than qualitative, and that (COG) seem(s) more concerned with defending (itself) than in taking up the struggle against racism." PWOC makes a similar point, stating that the defensiveness exhibited initially by COG members was subjective but that a deeper problem is now indicated by an objective defensiveness.

We will respond point by point and then attempt to tie the points together in a coherent whole. We feel it is important to respond point by point because to really understand and deepen the discussion we must go from the general to the specific, and then, after analyzing the specific mistakes, to draw generalized conclusions which can lead to a qualitative understanding of the problem.

The points raised by MSU and PWOC are virtually identical except that PWOC takes the centrality of the struggle against racism as a separate point. We did not separate it from the other points because it is a recurrent theme throughout this document. Also MSU raises the question of how COG members raised the neighborhood question. We address that as a separate point.

I. NATIONAL MINORITIES CONFERENCE RESOLUTION

COG's first response stated that the Labor Day Conference delegates "knew nothing about the (National Minorities) Conference." It is one thing to say that there is inadequate information, but it is quite another to state that delegates "knew nothing". Clearly, to ignore Comrade Tyree's presentation and the following discussion (largely by national minorities comrades) was not just distrustful as MSU said, it implies non-recognition. Non-recognition of national minority persons' opinions is blatant racism and it is inexcusable.

COG's conclusion that delegates voted in favor of the N-M Conference resolution out of a fear of being branded racist was clearly tainted by the above error. We still feel that there was inadequate information at

the Labor Day Conference to make a judgement about the correctness of the resolution. As the SC has acknowledged, documents from the conference should have been made available to the Labor Day Conference participants in advance. Only in that way, we feel, could we have related the oral presentation to the actual achievements of the N-M Conference.

Delegates could have voted for the resolution out of at least three positions: 1 they honestly felt there was enough information and agreed with the resolution, 2 they didn't want to cross the SC, 3 they feared being branded racist. Those are just possibilities however, and to assign the "guilt tripping" motive to some delegates without concrete examples was un-Marxist and shows COG's own bias against dealing with racism as a primary issue. Furthermore, assigning motives to people without proof and constructive purpose is a defense mechanism derived from the bourgeois ideology of individualism and it hinders constructive analysis. Again the bottom line is an unwillingness to deal with racism as a primary issue.

II. THE OCIC's PURPOSE

We agree with MSU and PWOC that there was a misunderstanding on COG's part regarding the OCIC's purpose. We feel that this misunderstanding arose out of COG's previous inability to determine the relationship of theory to practice in the OCIC.

Since the Labor Day Conference, however, a printed transcript, "The History and Conception of OCIC Centers" has been made available to us to study. Now our understanding of the theory-practice contradiction within the OCIC is much sharper. We now understand that the OCIC is a center for the tendency to summarize the practice of the various groups within it (also outside the OCIC in some cases), and to make theoretical conclusions based on that practice in addition to theoretical study.

We agree that COG's response was empiricist. Perhaps this was due to a desire on the part of COG members to take up the struggle against racism in an organized way guided by OCIC directives or at least suggestions. COG never was able to approach practice in an organized way even though many of its members were in industrial as well as other workplaces. Most people were engaged in trade union or support activities but did not attempt to identify or recruit advanced workers to the party building process.

More importantly, COG's "urging the OCIC to focus on mass practice in the struggle against racism" (PWOC) must be viewed within the context

of the racist errors pointed out previously. Given COG's demonstrated defensiveness, this mass practice point must be viewed primarily as an attempt to deflect the internal direction of the struggle against racism.

III. MORALISM

We feel that this error is real within the OCIC and must be struggled with. It manifested itself in the form and tone of some comrades criticism rather than the content of their remarks. The one making a criticism has a responsibility to make sure that the criticism is understood and should not seek to obtain agreement to the criticism until there is mutual understanding. The one being criticised has a responsibility to deepen the criticism to show that understanding and to move the discussion along. The criticised party has a further responsibility to do this as quickly as possible in order to avoid delays which can be a defense mechanism. Comrades who speak in order to show their unity with the criticism but who do not develop the criticism or make it more understandable are taking a moral approach by showing which "side" they line up on. This inquisitional approach is not constructive, and in fact hinders the process.

COG's problem was that it turned the racism-moralism relationship on its head and used the issue of moralism as a shield, as well as a sword to attack "opponents." Ironically the very moralism of which COG accused some comrades was used by COG in its "lecturing" in the first response.

The struggle against various forms of bourgeois ideology must be total and continuous, but clearly we must prioritize them if we are to maintain the proper perspective. Those priorities must be based on which is the most harmful to the communist and working class movement as a whole. Racism is correctly identified as the number one priority by the OCIC.

IV. THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The extent to which COG members warned delegates about the neighborhood was unnecessary. Also the way in which the warning was made was clearly intimidating. The result was the reinforcement of bourgeois ideology and hence objectively racist. The fact that the neighborhood in question was a transient and marginalized area is still, in our opinion, worth mentioning. Our point was not that Chicago was a "big city with some poor people and crime" but rather that this particular neighborhood was an area in which conference participants should take more precautions (walk in groups, etc.) than in other neighborhoods in the city. A simple statement to that affect would have sufficed, but the tone of COG members' warnings carried racist overtones.

In addition, non-recognition of national minority comrades' special problems in this area (more likelihood of police harrasment, etc.) was also a racist error as we pointed out in our first response. This is yet another example of COG's resistance to internalizing the struggle against racism.

V. COMRADE MALACHI

COG's first response maintained that the interruption of Comrade Malachi was not racist. It was based on the perception of the COG delegates that a non-racist statement had been turned into a racist statement, and on this basis they felt justified in interrupting Comrade Malachi to supposedly clear the record. They assumed that it was justifiable to interrupt a national minority comrade in a discussion about racism because of their good intentions to make a non-racist point.

It is clear to us now that the interruptions were racist both in terms of the attitude and behavior toward Comrade Malachi, as well as in the context of the discussion on racism. Because the COG delegates were defensive about the original criticism aimed at them on the racist characterization of the neighborhood, and because they did not understand or unite with the criticism, they were more interested in justifying their own position than in trying to understand the criticism. Because COG delegates didn't recognize the racist nature of their first error, they compounded that error through a subjective and racist response to Comrade Malachi, and this led to further denials of racism in our first response.

PWOC is correct to say that in a situation where incorrect and abusive behavior is exhibited toward national minority people, it is objective racism. Our response to Comrade Malachi, which we first termed as "defensive, subjective, individualistic, and lacking in respect," was a cover for what was the root problem: racism. Racism is all of those attitudes when exhibited toward national minority people. In this context, COG delegates displayed a blatantly racist attitude toward Comrade Malachi and only continued to deepen their racist errors by refusing to listen to criticism.

In the party building movement, our ability to build multi-national unity will be crippled if we do not recognize these errors and overcome them -- first in our attitudes and behavior, and secondly in our willingness to take up the struggle against racism as a cornerstone of our party building efforts.

VI. COG's FIRST RESPONSE

COG's initial response was not a qualitative break from its original position. It is unfortunate that COG's original position failed to understand the importance of the struggle against racism, but to have accepted the criticism without understanding it would have been unprincipled and un-Marxist. Not until MSU's and PWOC's replies to our first response and much deliberation and discussion of them, did the essence of the criticism become clear. The first response reflected the spirit of COG's discussion around the original criticisms. That spirit could be accurately described as "fortress mentality". The center of the discussion was around defending our original position with some minor alterations, and not seriously considering the heart of the criticisms.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The discussion of the various points of criticism has clarified the context within which COG approached the issue of racism. It has now become obvious to us that the fundamental problem here has been a resistance by COG to internalizing the struggle against racism. The reason why this resistance was so strong deserves further attention. COG's position at the conference is only an example of its general approach to the issue of racism. Another example is the way COG members undertook the study of narrow nationalism which some COG members had had much contact with during the organizing of various events in the city. The nationalist ideology of its practitioners proved to be quite a hindrance on many occasions, and so COG took up the study of the role of narrow nationalism. Interestingly, COG failed to study the question within the context of white racism from which nationalism is a natural reaction within the confines of bourgeois ideology. Also COG did not consider seriously its own deficiencies in its approach to the nationalists. The result was a one-sided and seriously flawed study.

The insights gained by this discussion will help COG members, and we hope, everyone in OCIC, to deal with racism in the future. We feel that this document represents a qualitative break by COG from its past approach. We realize that this document alone will not expunge COG of bourgeois ideology. The struggle against racism internally will continue to be a top priority.

Although we sincerely feel that the way in which some comrades made their criticism of COG exhibited a moralistic approach, and that crime is an issue which must be eventually addressed by OCIC, the primary issue

here is still racism. COG undermined any valid points concerning moralism and crime by using these issues as a cover for its failure to internalize the struggle against racism.

We hope that this discussion has been as instructive to others as it has been to us and that regional conferences devoted to the subject will follow. COG delegates to the Local Center conference in Detroit in May were favorably impressed with the discussion of racism that occurred there, and brought back lessons which helped us to clarify our views.