

# Letter on Silber – Newlin Debate

The following letter comes from a Guardian sustainer and was sent to both the Guardian and the Organizer. We are printing it as a contribution to a principled clarification of our differences with the Guardian on party-building.

Comrade Silber's performance in the recent debate with Comrade Newlin on party-building tasks at least had the merit of clearing up what the Guardian had previously left murky-- where it stands on the next steps in party-building.

First, on the question of the main danger to party-building, Silber downplayed the struggle against the "left" opportunist line in our tendency, and made the critique of "right economism," and the "fusion strategy" our primary task.

But the fusion approach is the only real safeguard we have against the predominant "leftism" of the new communist movement, and without this perspective, groups like the Guardian Clubs, the Tuscon Marxist-Leninist Collective (TMLC), and the Proletarian Unity League (PUL) have all been unable to break thoroughly with "leftism" on building line. That the Guardian continues to put forward a voluntarist formulation on the process of building the new communist party-- leaving their position at "political line is primary"-- demonstrates as clearly as anything else the danger of directing our main blows against "rightism" in a period whose central character is that we have not yet dealt fully with the manifestations or sources of ultra-"leftism", the isolation of theory from practice and the petty-bourgeois character of our forces and much of our activity.

Second, Silber is guilty of sloganeering-- the manipulation of contentless abstractions. He failed even to make a gesture at explaining what is meant by such phrases as "political line is primary" or "theoretical work is primary."

The practical results of this are twofold: I and many of my comrades had great difficulty following Silber's train of thought and found him piling vague gen-

eralities on top of one another. By the end of his speech, some of his points were obscure and we were not sure by what reasoning he had arrived at others. At the extreme, Silber tends toward demagoguery, making rhetorical flourishes as though he had vanquished his opponent by raising his voice and using important sounding phrases.

## SILBER PROVIDES NO PLAN

Silber's comments presented no plan which would point to the resolution of concrete problems in such a way as to give us guidance on where to go next, other than to say that the Guardian would not be a part of the Organizing Committee for the Ideological Center, and thus objectively opposing strengthening the only common forum for carrying on ideological debate amongst all our forces. The Ideological Center strategy is correct precisely because it is the only means we have for the construction and verification of political line for our movement. Silber apparently believes that we need no plan to centralize and guide the ideological struggle over line.

**By omitting clear strategic thinking on this score, he proposes that we continue to debate line questions from the current basis-- the partial, subjective experiences of several localities and national currents. Silber's outlook insures that we will continue to take up questions haphazardly, divorced from the needs of the class struggle and without any means of focusing on the most pressing problems for theoretical clarification. The repeated invocation, the near chanting of the need for "a correct general political line" cannot exorcize the necessity for pointing out the best means to struggle for such.**

Third, Silber continues to evade the matter of where a correct political line comes from. By implication, he makes the discussion among revolutionary theoreticians sufficient on their own to establish a correct orientation for the struggle of the working class against capitalism. In fact, he denies that practical work and especially the process of winning the

advanced elements in the mass movements to communism play any role in party-building now. We must wait, he says, until a correct political line drops full-blown from the skies and the party forms around this line.

In a nutshell, Silber mechanically separates theory from practice. He does not oppose the involvement of Marxist-Leninists in the spontaneous mass movements, as some comrades have charged. Silber is right that this charge is preposterous. He "merely" says that, on the particular task of party-building, practice now has no special significance. In Silber's logic, theoretical work to develop general political line must be lifted out of the context of the class struggle, lest we make economist errors! He does not say "stop practice" (although he says that for two years it must take a back seat). Nevertheless, he makes a voluntarist case by relating theory and practice in an idealist manner. "Theoretical work", he argues, is the key link to party-building in the present period; practical work does not cease but it plays *no role in party-building*. This approach is an affront to materialists; it sunders the dialectical interconnection between theory and practice. In every kind of period, party-building must express a particular unity of theory and practice. We cannot be idealists in the pre-party period and materialists when we have built a party.

## MATERIALISM VS. IDEALISM

In slandering the fusion perspective as aiming simply at the integration of communists into spontaneous economist struggles, Silber shows that his idealism blinds him to the necessity for formulating an answer to *the problem of where correct line comes from*. Fusion directs our theoretical work in such a manner that we take up questions so as to win a real vanguard position as the essence of party-building; it points to unity among Marxist-Leninists around a political line that guides the US working class in its struggle against monopoly capitalism. In opposition to this profound practical and materialist perspective, Silber informs us that we can proceed without any means

of verifying our theoretical productions and tells us that Marxist-Leninists can unite around the spontaneous strivings of revolutionary ideologists, around the ideas we hold in our skulls, no matter what their relation to the struggle of the working class.

Newlin is right to point out that a failure to grasp fusion as the heart of party-building leads to either economism or "left" idealism. Silber has fallen into the latter trap, proposing that our forces struggle for a correct general political line without any forms or mechanisms to place this struggle in the context of the overall class struggle and the building of a material force for revolution in the US, without a theoretical summing-up and condensation of the practice of our movement.

Silber seems to think that the PWOC caters to prejudices against intellectual and theoretical work. Nothing could be further from the mark. Large sections of our tendency have united around the Ideological Center proposal precisely because it is a plan to make our ideologists begin to occupy a vanguard role in the class struggle, to develop advanced workers into revolutionary intellectuals, and to cement the unity of the advanced and communism, giving the class struggle scientific guidance. However, a prejudice against idealism and dogmatism is a healthy thing. To the degree that the Guardian remains mired in the defense of theory in the abstract, to the extent that the Guardian defends voluntarism and the interests of intellectuals not connected to the working class struggle-- to that degree the Guardian does provoke suspicions among the forces seeking to build a com-

munist vanguard party by fusing revolutionary theory and the class struggle. The Guardian's line of abstention from the Ideological Center based on an idealist view of theory and a call for struggle against rightism in our tendency places it in objective unity with forces like TMLC and compromises its ability to contribute as it might to the common theoretical struggle to develop a full application of Marxism-Leninism to the US as the basis for our political line.