

A Discussion on the Mass Line

[This is a discussion between myself and another person formerly associated with the Single Spark Collective, on Oct. 3-4, 2008. While the SSC was formed on the basis of what we all thought was a common appreciation of, and dedication to, the mass line, it turned out that even within that group there were considerably different conceptions of just what the mass line even is. I have not corrected most of the typos in the emails, though I have added a few words in brackets to make the meaning clearer. -S.H.]

Hi F. & all,

Good! Let's talk some more about what the mass line is all about, and about some other issues you raised (whether or not they should be considered as part of the mass line). Probably you will already agree with some of what I say here, but since I'm not quite sure where the precise differences are between us, I'll include some stuff which may already be well known to you.

[Scott previously wrote:]

I find your conception of the mass line a little bit strange! For me the mass line is (primarily at least) a tool used to connect communists to the mass struggle, not a principle about relations between communists or communist groups. But that is one of a number of things we can continue to hash out further in the future.

[F. wrote in reply (10/3/08):]

Hey Scott,

I think on the practice of Mass Line we have to look in particular [at] what we mean by the "masses." For Mao, the Masses constituted all stratas, including the cadre of the CPC itself, in fact Mao always emphasized the need for revolutionaries to struggle for the line amongst the party. This struggle was not carry forward in the same way [that] struggle was obviously carry forward in the Soviet Union, where the loser of line struggle often found himself at the end of a barrel of a gun - Buhkarin may have been leaning toward a line of economism-revisionism in 1929, but ended up shoot [shot] in 1937 (same with many former party leaders).

In the same sense, to "unite the advance, win over the intermediate and isolate the backwards" at this point of our struggle means to unite with the non-RCP Maoists in whatever principle capacity possible. I think FRSO/OSCL and Kasama do offer that opportunity to really strenghten the lines of other comrades and fellow travellers and emerge with a stronger revolutionary grouping in this country.

Just as an example I'd like to point at the many incarnations of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) before its formation in 1996. For the CPN (M) to have emerged at all, it had to come out of 2 or 3 formations already in existent and split from the Communist Party of Nepal (Unity-Centre). I think that history and the history of all Communist struggle shows that organization isn't sacred, and we must enter unity of a principle type when it serves the interests of strenghtening our movement.

In this sense, I think it is important to win over the intermediate and unite the advanced, which I believe does exist with Kasama and FRSO/OCL. To have continued with the Single Spark Collective would have effectively meant not practicing the Mass Line, securing a small cabal, and waiting in anticipation for the "spark" rather than being it.

-F.

[Scott continues on 10/4/08:]

1. Who are the masses?

I get into this it more depth in chapter 5 of my mass line book, but the gist of the matter goes like this:

Marxists primarily think and talk in terms of social classes. Thus Marx talked mostly about the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. But in some societies there are other extremely important classes, and most notably the peasantry in both the old Russia and China. In China, especially, the peasantry was the overwhelming majority of the population. So while even Lenin could still frame revolutionary politics mostly in terms of the proletariat versus the bourgeoisie, the Chinese revolution led by Mao was most centrally the work of the peasantry (even though, as a Marxist, Mao still considered that the proletariat and its ideology was playing a *leading* role). Therefore politics in the Chinese revolution had to be discussed in terms of the peasantry and proletariat, on the one side, versus the feudal landlords, comprador bourgeoisie, and foreign imperialists, on the other side. This terminology, while accurate, was cumbersome. So Mao and the other communists usually spoke instead in terms of “the masses” (or “the people”) versus “the enemy”.

Thus in Chinese Maoist terminology, the masses were made up of these classes and strata: the huge peasantry, the small proletariat, and individuals and strata from the very small petty-bourgeoisie and even the national bourgeoisie. (One of the 5 stars in the Chinese flag represents the national bourgeoisie.) And “the enemy” was also a technical term in Maoist politics, and was made up of the feudal landlords, the bureaucratic big bourgeoisie and comprador bourgeoisie, the foreign imperialists, and sections or individuals from the remaining classes (including, of course, even some class traitors from the proletariat). In short, the terms “the masses” (or “the people”) and “the enemy” are technical shorthand for assemblages of classes and class strata. That’s the most fundamental thing.

In addition to this, there is a long standing analytical practice in Marxism of drawing a distinction between the Party and the masses. So in the general sense the Party is part of the masses (and made up of individuals from the masses), but in most political discourse references to “the masses” or “the people”

are references to the *rest of the masses* other than those in the Party. This is why we can talk about the *relationship* between the Party and the masses.

2. What is the mass line about primarily?

In Mao's China the term "the mass line" was always somewhat ambiguous. And, in particular, Mao tended to use the term differently than the rest of his own Party did! (Amazing fact!) For Mao, the core—at least—of the mass line was the leadership method of "from the masses, to the masses". And in this expression, Mao usually meant by the masses, the *non-Party* masses. In other words, he was talking about a method that the Party should use in order to lead (the rest of) the masses in struggle against the enemy.

Most of the other leaders of the CPC (even the "Gang of Four"!) never seem to have fully grasped this. When Liu Shaoqi or Deng Xiaoping talked about "the mass line" (as they often did!) it always meant something much more general, much more vague, and much more amorphous. In general they used the term to refer to what I would prefer to call "having a mass perspective". This includes such things as understanding that it is the masses themselves who must make revolution (and that the Party can't do it "for them"), that the masses are the makers of history, that we should take pains to explain the line and policies of the Party carefully to the masses, that we should work wholeheartedly for the masses, that we should "involve" the masses in the work of the Party, that we should "unite the advanced, win over the intermediate and isolate the backward elements", and so forth. All of this is also important, but it is just not what the mass line is most centrally about.

3. Defining the term "the mass line".

When I first started studying the mass line in the late 60s and early 70s I was troubled by this vagueness about what "the mass line" was really all about. I already knew the mass line was very important, but what aspects were most central? What was really *key* here?

At that time Avakian and the RU (this is before the RCP was formed) started referring to the mass line as "a method of leadership". At first this puzzled me, since some aspects of what was widely called the mass line (such as the principle that the masses are the makers of history) are only tangentially related to how one goes about actually leading the masses in struggle. But I soon came to appreciate that the RU really was correct to *define* the mass line in the way they were doing. It puts the emphasis where it really belongs, on the core concept, and the concept that Mao himself focused on, "from the masses, to the masses".

I should add that it turned out that the RCP—even back then—rarely if ever actually used this mass line method of "from the masses, to the masses" in their own leadership work, such as it was. For decades I didn't understand how they could put forward this leadership method, and then not actually use it! Only much later did I come to understand that by the term "leadership" itself, they really only meant what I would call the work of revolutionary *education*—that is, putting forward revolutionary *ideas*. They were not really talking about leading the masses in struggle at all! Thus it turned out that Avakian and the RCP created and championed what should be considered the correct Maoist *definition* of the mass line, even though they didn't correctly understand the words they used when they did so! (A tremendous irony!)

I adopted that RCP definition of the mass line, and have never deviated from it. As I studied Mao's writings in depth I came to see even more deeply how appropriate and truly correct that definition (in terms of "from the masses, to the masses") really is. But this is *not* the understanding of the mass line that either the RCP has (because they misconstrue the whole notion of "leadership") nor is it the usual conception of the mass line that prevails within the Maoist movement generally, either in this country, or in South Asia, or anywhere! Instead, most Maoists everywhere continue to use the term in the vague, amorphous way that almost everyone in the Communist Party of China did. Everyone *except* Mao, that is! This is maddening and frustrating to me! And it is why I all the more try to convince others to define the mass line in terms of "from the masses, to the masses", or to at least view that as the core concept of the mass line.

The problem with thinking of the mass line in the usual amorphous way is that the key, core concept of the leadership method of "from the masses, to the masses" gets very much downplayed, or even often entirely forgotten!

4. It is true that the Party (or any truly Maoist organization) must also use the mass line method of leadership *within* it. But first, this is not the primary use of the mass line. (The primary purpose is as the organization's method of leading the masses in struggle.)

And second, this use of the mass line within the Party (or organization) is most centrally for the purpose of promoting the Party's use of the mass line method *with the masses!* This is especially important within a large Party, where the top leadership can't hope to be as fully in contact with all the masses as the whole Party is (or should be). In short, the ideas and suggestions for mass action that the masses present to individual Party members must be transmitted in living form up through the ranks to the Party leadership so that it can better decide what policies and actions to try to popularize to the masses in general and around which ones to try to lead them in struggle.

This is what Mao talked about frequently when he referred to the Party as a "factory" which processes the ideas of the masses and turns those varied and half-developed ideas into a powerful line around which the masses in general can be mobilized.

5. F---, what you are focusing on in your letter seems to not really be the mass line at all, but rather the need for a single MLM Party, and for democratic struggle within that Party. I certainly agree with that, and with the need for and value of ideological struggle within the Party.

Moreover, I think we also agree that ideological struggle should exist and continue within our whole movement, and not just within specific organizations. This means that we *do not have to be in a single organization* in order to work with or struggle with each other!

You say that "we should unite with the non-RCP Maoists in whatever principle capacity possible." That seems to suggest that it is the obligation of every "non-RCP Maoist" to join together in one organization. This is quite naïve in many respects, I'm afraid.

First, people can (sometimes!) struggle and learn from each other even if they are not in the same organization, or any organization. Second, people can work together in mass struggles whether or not they are in the same political organization. But third, and most to the point here, it is wrong to suppose that if people simply consider themselves Maoists (or “non-RCP Maoists”) that they have sufficient unity of purpose, goals, and methods, that they can and should reasonably all join one organization. It just ain’t so.

The minimum standards I personally set for any revolutionary party or organization that I care to join are pretty much the principles of unity that we had for the SSC. One of those principles was a firm commitment and determination to use the mass line (in Mao’s sense). That rules out the RCP (and also MIM!). I am not yet convinced that it doesn’t also rule out Kasama and the FRSOs, despite their claims to the contrary. I know for a fact that [one prominent person in Kasama] *identifies* the mass line with the principle that the masses are the makers of history, for example, and *not* with the leadership method of “from the masses, to the masses”. I.e., he just doesn’t get it! Moreover, simply participating with the masses in their struggles, while important, is *not* the same as using the mass line. I have never heard of even one example of the FRSOs actually using the method of “from the masses, to the masses” either. (I would certainly admit that they *might* be doing so, and that they are far more likely to do so than the RCP is, however.)

[A clear case of using the mass line means *learning* from the masses *how* to lead the mass struggle, *appraising* those ideas in light of MLM theory and a careful investigation of the objective situation, and then actually *leading* the mass struggle on that basis.]

Another of those absolutely necessary principles is the firm commitment and determination to bring revolutionary ideas *to the masses we work with*. The RCP has sort of tried to do this over the years (though very ineffectively). Lately, they seem much more concerned to bring the living savior Bob Avakian to the masses rather than actual revolutionary ideas. The Kasama group does seem to want to bring revolutionary ideas to the masses, although they have little actual experience in attempting to do so yet. (My biggest beef with them, as I said, is over their lack of understanding of and support for the mass line.)

As for the FRSOs, they have by no means demonstrated to me that they are seriously attempting to bring revolutionary ideas to the masses. In fact, when they are pressed on the matter and start talking about how “red level work” is currently inappropriate except in the case of a few individuals, I see ingrained opportunism in their thinking and practice. Their whole notion of what “red level work” even is is hopelessly screwed up. [They view it as preaching to the masses in MLM jargon.]

So the situation for me is that no existing group seems to be *sufficiently* on the right track that I care to join up with them. The fact that a group calls itself, or considers itself, communist, or Maoist, is just not enough.

I don’t see my requirements as being very demanding! The SSC principles of unity were pretty basic after all, and allowed for tremendous differences of opinion on all sorts of other matters. But the actual fact is that neither Kasama nor the FRSOs even *truly* measures up to our SSC principles. At least they certainly haven’t demonstrated that yet. If they do, then I will reconsider them.

As I say, it is wrong to characterize my position as some sort of violation of the “mass line”! Sticking to one’s basic revolutionary principles is something that is a *prerequisite* to using the mass line, and never a failure to use the mass line.

The reason that SSC had to be abandoned is that our small group no longer had the unity to continue it. That means to me that we really no longer had the unity we thought we had around the basic SSC principles. If we did have that unity we would actually be in a better position to continue struggling collectively with Kasama and the FRSOs while trying to attract the fairly small, but continuing stream of people who come forward who actually do agree with those principles.

But I don’t want to leave this on such a negative and critical note. We all need to keep on struggling with all those around us, keep on studying seriously (especially the core MLM works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao), and keep on gathering experience in how to go about bringing revolutionary ideas to the masses. And we all have to resist in determined ways the revisionist thinking that is inevitable in our movement, no matter *what* organizations we are part of. (Mao was serious when he said that revisionism is the main danger.) If we all keep doing these things, then—despite whatever differences we may presently have—we will all keep to the same basic road and remain revolutionary comrades.

Scott