

THE COMMUNIST PHILOSOPHY OF KNOWLEDGE: PART I

Where does knowledge come from? Capitalist ideology provides many wrong answers to this question: that knowledge comes from academic authorities, from geniuses, from God, sacred books, religious leaders, etc.

Marx's answer to this question is the basis of communist philosophy of knowledge. He wrote that whether human thinking is true or not is a practical question: "Man must prove the truth—that is, the reality and power ... of his thinking in practice." The truth of any thinking that is not connected with practice can't actually be figured out—and wouldn't matter anyway!

To understand where knowledge comes from, then, means understanding human practical activity. We must also understand how practice can provide knowledge that is useful to people in various ways, including the most important task for the working class, making communist revolution.

Practice is different from merely observing something, since it always involves the activity of *changing things*, as well as being changed yourself by your activity. Practice starts with making a living, raising kids, and paying the bills. This practice is only possible because of the practical activity of producing the things every one needs to live: food, clothes, housing, etc. The practice of production includes things that workers usually don't get paid for like producing and raising children.

Since they are directly involved in production,

workers usually know much more about the production process than their bosses do. The knowledge they get from production helps them produce more effectively. Knowledge doesn't just derive from practice—it *directs* practice.

Under capitalism the practice of production always involves another kind of practice: class struggle. What jobs there are, what the pay and hours are, who pays what taxes and how are those taxes used, which class runs the government—these are all subjects of class struggle. So are the practical struggles about who gets shot by the cops, or goes to prison, fights in wars, or starves to death. Finally, there is the practical battle the working class must fight to overthrow capitalism and establish communism. Being involved in all these conflicts is part of practice, but the practice of past revolutions and of current organizing for revolution is the kind that is most critical for the success of communist revolution.

There are several other kinds of practice that are important for knowledge. Under capitalism, capitalists fight wars for profits and the labor, and raw materials (like oil) that capitalists need to make profits and keep their rivals from making them. The practice of these battles between the capitalists of different countries is a very important source of knowledge. Along with the death and suffering they cause, wars have been a source of new scientific discoveries and technological improvements. The practice of fighting wars also provides a vital kind of knowledge for com-

munist revolution. To overthrow the bosses and defend workers' victory requires practical experience in fighting, and soldiers and vets are a key resource in developing the workers' army.

Besides production, class struggle, and war, scientific experimentation is essential for some kinds of knowledge. Experimentation is a form of labor in which obtaining information is the main goal. Experimentation often involves the skills and tools similar to manual labor—scientists need to "get their hands dirty."

There are other kinds of practice that not part of production, social conflict, or science, but are important parts of human life. These include activities like dating, playing sports, drawing a picture, playing a musical instrument, etc.

Not every kind of practice leads to knowledge. Practicing a religion or reformist politics provides very little basis for knowledge. These also have a corrupting influence on people that makes it more difficult for them to honestly evaluate evidence and find the truth. Practice based on the wrong political line may only provide the knowledge that the line is wrong.

Practical knowledge is as vital for revolution as it is for other things workers need to do, but knowledge also goes beyond practice to theory. In the next column, we will discuss why revolutionary theory is necessary for the victory of communism, and how theory is tested and corrected by practice.