

THE COMMUNIST PHILOSOPHY OF KNOWLEDGE, PART III

“Our theory is not a dogma, but a guide to action,” —V. I. Lenin, 1917

In the last column we discussed the difference between generalizations from experience and theories. Generalizations like “most union leaders side with the bosses” are important knowledge, but can’t explain why things happen and don’t show what is possible and what isn’t. Only theories and the laws they contain can do this. For example, the law of the falling rate of profit explains how capitalist crises happen and shows that they must happen.

Discovering true theories is not an easy process. It requires knowledge of facts and generalizations, but goes beyond them. People have to think up laws and explanations, compare them with other theories, and test them in practice. This is always a collective process, but some individuals, like Marx or Einstein, can play a leading role. Theories grow out of practice, but that is not enough to show which ones are correct. Only testing a theory in practice can show whether a theory that sounds pretty good is actually true.

About a hundred years ago, most physicists believed a theory that said that empty space isn’t possible, but must be filled with invisible stuff called “ether,” for light to travel through. Scientific experiments were made to try to measure the motion of the Earth through the ether, but didn’t find any. Some scientists tried to argue that the ether was really there but could not be detected because it was dragged along by the Earth. This idea and some other attempts to “save” ether theory were finally rejected because they led to other results that did not work out in practice.

Similarly in the political theory of communism, leaders of the old communist movement thought that the working class could only get to communism by going through a stage of socialism. This

theory turned out to be wrong. Socialism proved to be a form of capitalism, with capitalism’s wage system and government hierarchy, and can never lead to communism.

Coming to this conclusion was not simple. The history of Russia, China, and other countries showed that the generalization “Socialism doesn’t lead to communism” is true. Explaining why it is true requires a correct theory of socialism. Like the scientists who kept defending ether theory, some people still claim that socialism could work if it were “done right.” The reason that this idea is wrong is that socialism’s wage system gradually generates a new capitalist class that matches socialism’s capitalist relations on the job and in the party and government. People with privileges fight to keep them or are replaced by those who will. Even the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, a huge mass movement of workers, peasants and students, could not kick the new capitalists out of power in China, where they remain to this day.

People who believed that socialism was necessary thought that workers were not “ready” for communism, and had to go through something else first. Reformism makes a similar mistake, assuming that workers cannot be won to fight directly for communism. Actual practice shows that these theories are wrong and lead to defeat. Both in natural science and in politics, if the theory that guides you is not at least close to the truth, it will fail in practice. In the fight for communism, some failures due to wrong theories are just temporary setbacks, but reformism and socialism are fatal mistakes that are being paid for in workers’ suffering and blood.

The rejection of socialism is a big step forward in communist theory and practice, but we still need a much better understanding of how to win communism and keep it. One key idea is the mass communist party, rather than a small party of leaders. The main job of ICWP is to build a mass communist party in the factories, schools, and the military.

The mass party is only part of the story, however. To win communism, defeat revisionism, and actually run communist society, we need the approach of “mobilizing the masses of workers for communism.” ICWP is putting this idea into practice, so we can build up the communist movement now and improve the theory of mass mobilization to do this better. Our next column will discuss the how we are beginning to do this.

We Goofed

We try to have our paper exactly the same in English and Spanish, but sometimes we make mistakes.

The front page of the last issue (v. 1 #22) had a big mistake. The main headline in Spanish translates as “Need to Lead the Struggle to Build ICWP.” In the English edition, it reads “Need to Build a Communist Revolution.”

The Spanish version was better because it highlights the immediate, concrete task of building the Party. The English version was too abstract, though it clearly stated our Party’s goal of communist revolution.

An even better headline would have captured both ideas: “Need to Build ICWP for Communist Revolution.”

We apologize to our readers for this discrepancy.