

“Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.” Lenin, *What Is To Be Done*

MECHANIST PHILOSOPHY IN THE USSR

This column is the first of several about the development of dialectics in the USSR in the 1920s and ‘30s. This was a period of intense struggle over the basic principles of dialectics and the application of these principles to politics and economics. In this column and the next one, we will discuss the false philosophy of change called “mechanism” or mechanical materialism.

The part of the science of physics that deals with forces and the changes in motion that forces cause is called “mechanics.” Mechanics has specific laws that determine how forces combine. In particular, forces of equal strength that push in opposite directions cancel each other out and cause no change in motion.

Mechanism

Philosophical mechanism is modeled on some aspects of mechanics. It was advocated in particular by Nicolai Bukharin, an influential Bolshevik leader, who used mechanism to defend his pro-capitalist policies. In the philosophy textbook

that he wrote, Bukharin defined a contradiction as “antagonism of forces acting in different directions.” This conception of contradiction leads to very serious errors.

One problem with this definition is that it isn’t just forces that can be contradictory. Marx saw that the tendency of the rate of profit to fall is contradicted by a fall in wages, but tendencies and wage cuts are not forces. Not only tendencies, but other things like requirements and ideas, can be the sides of a contradiction. Bukharin also did not explain what antagonism is and how it differs from contradiction.

Unity of Opposites is Critical

The main problem, however, is that Bukharin said nothing about how the sides of a contradiction are connected. Dialectical contradictions combine both struggle and unity of opposites. Opposites have a connection of mutual dependence, called an “organic relation.” Bukharin denied that any organic relation was neces-

sary, but the unity of a contradiction is in fact essential.

One important kind of connection of opposites is each side coming to mirror its opposite. In a soccer game, each team tries to undermine its opponent’s strengths and overcome its own weaknesses. Against an opponent with a star striker, a team may assign several midfielders to mark him or her. Against another opponent, it will organize its players differently. Each side is partly determined by its opposite.

Opposites can also get inside each other. Since the bosses know that they can’t prevent workers from fighting back, they use their laws, the media, bribery, etc., to try to give pro-boss leadership to workers’ struggles and weaken them. Opposites penetrate each other. This is a fundamental fact of dialectics which is ignored by mechanists.

Since mechanical forces can cancel each other out, Bukharin saidn this can happen in a contradiction. “We then have a state of ‘rest,’ i.e., their actual ‘conflict’ is concealed.” Bukharin applied this idea to the conflict of rival imperialists, He claimed that empires that are equally matched can come to agreements with each other “when there is equality of forces, when victory is beyond belief, when struggle is hopeless.”

The example of imperialist rivalry shows that Bukharin was fundamentally wrong about this. The intensity of conflict between empires of

approximately equal strength can be very high, as it was between the US and the USSR in the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s. Even when they avoid direct military confrontation with each other, imperialists back wars fought by smaller forces that they sponsor. The Soviets did this against the US in Vietnam in the ‘60s and Egypt in the ‘70s. The US did the same in Afghanistan in the ‘80s and in Israel for many decades.

Contradictions between sides which are both strong enough to hold back the other tend to be much more intense than those where one side is

obviously dominant. Georgia did not resist much when the Russians invaded them in 2008, and Brazil did not put up much of a fight against Germany in the world cup.

Because contradictions have both struggle and unity, because the sides reflect each other and penetrate each other, dialectical contradictions are not very similar to combinations of forces in physics. In particular, their sides don’t cancel out.

In our next column, we will see the reactionary consequences of the mechanist philosophy of contradiction in the early political struggles in the USSR.