A Big Contradiction: Being Communists in a Capitalist System

In the last issue of Red Flag, we discussed the differences between change in the quantity of something, like your age or your weight, and a change in quality, like the change from health to sickness or life to death. In this column, we will look a little deeper into qualitative change, and discuss what happens as qualitative changes follow one another.

A qualitative change can only happen when some aspect of a thing or a process has been replaced by an opposite characteristic, like the solidity of ice being replaced by the fluidity of liquid water when ice melts. This transition from one quality to an opposite quality is called a dialectical negation.

This use of the word ‘negation’ does not mean that the transition it describes is something negative or bad. If you have been out of work and find a new job, the transition you make is the negation of your unemployment, which isn’t a bad thing.

A dialectical negation is never a complete change in all aspects. Some of a thing’s qualities change into their opposites while others are preserved. A healthy person who gets the flu undergoes a negation from health to sickness, but that person’s brain, heart, legs, etc., will usually continue to work.

The contradictions inside things drive them to change. Sometimes this change is just change in quantity, but if quantitative change continues far enough, it produces qualitative change, that is, dialectical negation. Another way to put this point is that qualities have quantitative limits. If the rivalry of competing capitalist countries becomes intense enough, they make the transition from peace to war, or from small wars to big ones.

Dialectical negation does not happen all at once, but over a long period of time. As long as a process lasts, the contradictions in it will drive it to the next negation. History keeps going, one dialectical negation after another. This is part of the dialectical law called the Negation of the Negation.

A dialectical negation is never completely reversed. If you have an accident and break your arm, that is a dialectical negation. If your arm heals, that is a negation of the negation. Your arm may seem as good as new, but in fact the structure of your broken bone has permanently changed, even if what is new is too small to notice.

In other dialectical negations, the difference is a big one. If a seed grows into a plant (a negation) and the plant produces a new seed with altered genes (a second negation), the new seed may produce a plant with quite different characteristics (a mutation). This is an essential part of evolution by natural selection. Marx described the history of capitalism as capitalists grabbing the land and labor of workers and small farmers (a negation), and communist revolution as grabbing the means of production from the capitalists (a second negation). This second negation does not take us back to pre-capitalist days, but is a huge step forward.

One way to describe how negations follow negations is by comparing a process to a spiral. Each negation is a half twist around the spiral. If you start at the top, two half twists bring you back to the top, but farther along the spiral. So history is not circular. Situations that are similar to the past can happen, but always somewhat different from what happened before. This is the second part of the law of the Negation of the Negation.

People sometimes describe the result of the second negation as a partial repetition of the original situation on a ‘higher level.’ The result is higher, but only in the sense that the process is farther along in its development. ‘Higher’ does not mean better. The process of the death of an empire, for example, goes through many dialectical negations that make it worse and worse. As we build up the communist movement, however, we need to use the Law of the Negation of the Negation to understand the course of the struggle for communism. This will be the topic of our next column.

We know the responsibility entailed by declaring ourselves communists of ICWP before our friends. It demands consistency of our actions and the political line that we put forward. Our daily life reflects whether or not we understand the politics we advocate. In a meeting, our collective discussed dialectical materialism, contradiction and the struggle of opposites. The example we used was marriage: unity = marriage or a couple, contradiction = communist ideas vs. capitalist ideas. This example uncovered contradictions in our marriage that were causing us problems. The collective strongly pushed to sharpen our contradictions with an objective analysis of the root of the problem. They confronted our contradictions and we discussed them for almost four hours. The result: a lot of learning for the whole collective. We could clearly see the root of the problem and its solution. It was an emotionally exhausting session, to the degree that when we were alone, we said that we felt that we had undressed in front of the comrades.

Couples’ problems are recurrent under this system whether or not we’re communists. We began to avoid talking about them in meetings, or minimized them. We aren’t suggesting that we shouldn’t talk about these problems but that we dedicate time when a couple or comrades needs it and that we have confidence in the collective. No one is exempt.

We need to put contradictions on the table, sharpening and resolving them to reach a higher level of unity.

When problems become very sharp some recommend seeking ‘specialized’ help. As communists, we recommend dealing with the problem as a collective, without fear. Most psychologists have capitalist training and their solutions aren’t always the best, since they don’t see the couple as class brothers and sisters, but as the closest enemy.

Now, sharpening the contradictions and provoking movement doesn’t guarantee making the best decision, or that we advance to the left. Many times capitalist ideas win out and the problem ends in divorce. What does this depend on? The answer is the goal pursued and the road taken to get there.

In the case of marriage, when we don’t sharpen the contradictions, the goals stop being collective, and capitalist ideas win out. This is reflected in actions that are inconsistent with communist ideas (for example, individualism, sexism, liberalism, infidelity, etc.). When we don’t discuss these contradictions by moving to the left, the marriage can end in separation.

Capitalism has put forward an infinity of biological ‘theories’ of couples (humans and other species) that justify anti-communist statements. We believe that in the couple there should exist several elements of unity: solidarity, loyalty, alliance, consideration, and hormonal attraction. However, we don’t deny that this last changes according to social conditions, both physiological and environmental. It’s a factor so vulnerable and temporary that we shouldn’t allow it to condition or rise above the factors that we need as a working class.

On many occasions in capitalism, unity is maintained in a marriage under agreements to not intensify the contradictions: don’t criticize me and I won’t criticize you, respect my ideas and I’ll respect yours. These are clear signs of capitalist ideas, in essence the contradiction is more alive than ever, the problems increase and the right wins thus destroying the working class and communist revolution.

As class brothers and sisters, we’re stronger together than separated. As the working class we need to be united. When we understand this, we make the ideological struggle primary and solve the contradictions in favor of our class. For this there must be the willingness and the conviction to defeat capitalist ideas in ourselves, because the internal is primary. When there’s not this conviction, when unity=marrige, when the struggle ends, this is a blow for our class and the revolution. Let’s reverse this by building for communist revolution in ICWP.

Red Couple

Questions for Red Flag Readers’ Groups:

1. In a letter on page 15, a comrade asks if we are building illusions in society? What other institutions must we rethink?

2. The article about communist education (p.14) says “we need to rethink every institution in society, including schools,” What do you think about the article’s vision of education in a communist society? What other institutions must we rethink?