

The Class Background and Orientation of the New Left

Some Questions Arising from the Split at the Liberated Guardian

In mid-December, after one and a half years of hidden struggle and nearly five weeks of intense effort to re-examine and clarify the politics of the newspaper there was a split at the Liberated Guardian.

Nine people, most of whom started working actively on the paper last fall, walked out of a general meeting on Saturday, December 11. They proclaimed themselves to be the "real" Liberated Guardian and stated that they intended to take over full control of the newspaper. They left behind the six of us who have drafted this statement—all but one of whom had been related to the paper for a year or more. By the next morning the people who walked out had removed from the office the subscription file, addressograph plates, checkbook, corporation papers and seal, a full cash box, all copies of the pamphlet on the Weather underground and materials for putting out a paper. The following Monday they filed a change of address with the post office. Since that time they have proceeded to put out their "liberated" Liberated Guardian (LLG).

Although fewer than 20 people were involved altogether, we feel that the nature of the split gives it significance that extends well beyond the limits of the newspaper itself. In many ways it lays bare crucial conflicting political tendencies in the "movement" and thus reflects the larger crisis confronting all of us who are working in the worldwide struggle against capitalism and imperialism. We think it is important to get out our account of the conflict as one further effort—alongside those already made by many others—to break out of the "movement" and the "New Left" of the sixties and to help establish the revolutionary struggle on a sound political footing.

WHAT THE FIGHT WAS ALL ABOUT

Although the people on the other side were far from agreed on all issues they rallied around a leadership whose politics reflected the prominent tendencies in the New Left. At the core of our conflict with them was a disagreement about the significance of class. We believe that capitalist society is a class society and all revolutions are class struggles. They do not. They claimed that their politics were based on a class analysis: "The whole point after all is to overthrow the ruling class." But they screamed and hit the ceiling whenever we pointed out the class nature of a specific struggle. This led us to look more closely at what they were saying and at their image of the revolutionary process. It became abundantly clear that class is at best peripheral to their analysis, something which requires only token mention—no more important than race or sex. Class is never recognized as the only basis for the unity needed to make a revolution against international capitalism. As a result the working class is forgotten as irrelevant or opposed as a hostile force, and is seen as exclusively white. This occurs not simply by oversight, but by consistent and systematic resistance.

The treacherous thing is that this profoundly anti-working class bias is not explicit, like "we are against the working class." Rather it is implicit, as an integral part of a whole political analysis and world outlook. It is buried beneath an entire arsenal of cherished New Left concepts, like the stress on the "racism of the working class" and the inability to see "Third World" people in class terms; the tendency to see racism, sexism, and class oppression as equivalent; and the primacy given to culture, especially "youth culture." This anti-working class bias is also seen in the assumption that the revolution in the United States will be made by or at least led by independent "categories" of rebels, like youth, blacks, women, gays, prisoners, and the underground (even though there is no concept of how these independent "categories" would join forces). Sometimes, if pressed, they will admit the working class to the revo-

lution as one force among many on an equal footing with these other groups or categories. But this only makes it clear that they do not see revolution as class war.

THE QUESTION OF MANIPULATION

When the people allied with this anti-working class tendency walked out, they announced that they were doing so on the basis of the issue of "manipulation." They identified four of the six of us as guilty of this offense. After walking out, however, they modified their position and said in their published statement on the split that the issues were both manipulation and class.

It is clear, however, that this charge of manipulation was a hypocritical one that served to make the tactic of a takeover palatable to several people who were less clearly committed to their side. Although we offered to discuss the question of manipulation as long as manipulation on both sides was discussed, this offer was rejected. It is true that the fight was fierce, as would be expected in a struggle over such fundamental issues. In fact, for five weeks we had faced an incredible array of tactics: abusive personal attacks, half-hour harangues fuzzing over the questions at issue, threats to stalk out of meetings, secret caucuses just before proposals were made, and intensive personal cultivation of people in the middle. On the other hand, there is no denying that we pushed hard for a re-examination of the politics of the paper.

As the battle wore on, those of us who have come to a working class politics functioned somewhat naively and ineffectively. We made occasional pointed interruptions to keep the long harangues from obscuring differences. We met efforts to turn the debate away from the task of re-examining the paper's politics by working out awkward proposals on the floor and then pushing for them vigorously. This resulted in a fair amount of abrasiveness coming from our side. However, we did not caucus as a group, formulate careful proposals in advance, or make a concerted effort to win over people in the middle—under the perhaps mistaken conviction that such forms of operating were manipulative. Or, put somewhat differently, we did not see clearly enough that the kind of changes we were talking about would inevitably mean a split, nor did we prepare ourselves for that eventuality.

The struggle was about class, not about the tactics which became fairly heavy on both sides. Perhaps the clearest illustration of the hypocrisy of the "issue of manipulation" was the ultimate tactic they employed: takeover. A takeover is not an illegitimate tactic in some situations, perhaps including this one. But it is hardly consistent with being "non-manipulative." This is especially true when there is no prior effort to collectively face up to the reality of a split or to find a comradely way to handle it. Thus the anti-authoritarian stance of the New Left was used here only as a facade bearing little relationship either to the tactics used or to the real issues at stake.

We are sure that this split was not basically a conflict over "manipulation." Rather, it reflected clear differences in political views about the class nature of the revolutionary struggle.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE PETTY BOURGEOIS NATURE OF THE 'MOVEMENT'

The resistance thrown up against a class analysis was so dogged and systematic that it was clear that some very real interests were at stake. We began to realize that the roots of these attitudes and politics lie in the class origins of the New Left itself.

At first we tended to describe the origins of the "movement" in terms of its university-educated and well-to-do background. But as the fight continued and we began to analyze the class origins of the people involved, including our own, a new and heretofore neglected fact began to emerge: we are primarily the daughters and sons of the petty bourgeoisie—self-employed professionals, small stockholders, recipients

of royalties, small businessmen, small real estate owners, and small farmers. We have come to suspect that perhaps the New Left as a whole is rooted primarily in the petty bourgeoisie—that it originated there, expanded there, and that's where its remnants still are.

Understanding the New Left as a primarily petty bourgeois movement might help to account for its incredible hostility and blindness to the working class. Such attitudes after all are typical petty bourgeois attitudes. In the class structure, the petty bourgeoisie stands a notch above the working class and has traditionally been hostile toward it. Moreover its gaze is always upward into the ruling class.

Petty bourgeois political movements, such as the New Left, tend to focus on established political institutions—as seen in incessant trips to Washington and attempts to influence national policy. This petty bourgeois character also accounts for the fact that many New Left projects boil down to *going into business*—bookstores, newspapers, print shops, farms, organic food stores and restaurants, and craft making and peddling of all kinds.

Seeing the New Left as a petty bourgeois movement might also help account for its appearance in the first place. The radicalism of the sixties coincided with the end of post-war prosperity in the U.S. and came on top of years of incredible concentration of business in the hands of giant conglomerates. Both trends, along with the steady decline of the farming population, further compressed the size of the petty bourgeois class. Perhaps the university-educated, well-to-do, “middle class” kids revolted because they knew they could not maintain the petty bourgeois position of their parents and faced a bleak future as wage earners. They were being forced out of the petty bourgeoisie and into the working class. They had to survive in academic factories, in polluted cities, and clerical production lines and were under the threat of becoming cannon fodder for neo-colonial wars.

Today the “movement”—which in the late sixties grew to include millions of students and young people—is largely a thing of the past. Its petty bourgeois character helps to account for its decline as well as for its appearance. Even at its peak, the “movement” never significantly moved beyond its narrow class limits. As a result it was not able to deepen the struggle in a way that could reach the entire population and has been severely threatened by the repression that has begun to appear. Most crucially, its members have been unable to accept the tremendous changes in personal identity required for an alliance with people immediately below them in the class structure—rather than a romantic identification with distant revolutionary groups. With Vietnamization and increased enlistment because of higher military pay, the draft has also become less a threat to the petty bourgeoisie. And it may even be that the petty bourgeoisie's position relative to the working class has been improved by the distress brought about by economic decline.

Facing the sharp decline of the “movement,” petty bourgeois radicals are now in a very different situation from the time when they were able to be in the vanguard of struggles in the late sixties. Some ex-radicals will find themselves attracted, as many already have been, to drop out into careers and professions or into rural communes and other cultural surrogates for politics. Others, perhaps including the LLG, will be tempted by the liberal electoral campaigns of a Lindsay or a Kennedy in order to stop fascism or build “breathing space” for radicals. There will be a few—like those associated with the LLG—who will strive to recreate the heroic days of Columbia, Berkeley, Chicago, and the Pentagon. It is possible that there will be moments when struggles in Chile, Indochina, U.S. ghettos or elsewhere will again provide an occasion for this same kind of support politics. As we see it, however, the revolutionary course is to make a sharp break with the petty bourgeois past and the myriad of commitments and connections this involves, to discover a working class identity, and to join as a participant in genuinely proletarian struggles.

BACKGROUND OF THE SPLIT: A YEAR AND A HALF WITH NO EXPLICIT POLITICS

The depth of the political disagreements that emerged took us a little by surprise. The awareness we came to of the deep-seated anti-working class bias tucked away in the New Left's political philosophy represents a kind of *discovery* for us. We certainly never suspected such profound disagreements when we began the effort to re-examine the politics of the paper in early November at a weekend conference called expressly for that purpose. The effort at that time was merely to try to make the politics of the newspaper more explicit and up front rather than allowing them to remain implicit and ill-defined. This attempt to get a more explicitly defined politics has a long history in itself and in a sense characterizes the whole history of the Liberated Guardian.

The Liberated Guardian was started in April 1970 by 19 people who walked out of the Guardian, a long-established newspaper of the left. These people and their supporters reflected as many different political tendencies as did the movement itself. The reason for that split was the dishonesty in the paper's organization and, to some extent, its hostility toward New Left militancy—and not what we now see as the inadequacy of its politics, class composition, and constituency.

The new paper, as we now understand it, was in fact not much different from the old—a petty bourgeois journal with an overwhelming focus on Third World issues and token treatment of the working class. Both papers were kept alive by the labor of droves of “movement people.”

In looking back on the history of the paper from our present perspective, these features stand out:

—An early decision not to have editorials or articles written by members of the collective originated as a reaction to the dominant and elitist role played by a few individuals in defining the politics of the old Guardian. But in fact this decision served to establish a pattern of implicit politics. For example, the paper took no explicit stand on May Day, mass anti-war marches, or even the underground. It was not until June 1971 that the paper actually committed itself to an explicit position on anything—an editorial calling for noncooperation with grand juries.

—The printing of communiques from the Weather underground about a month after the paper started caused a critical debate which shaped the future orientation of the LG. A number of people within and outside the collective opposed the paper's implicit support of the Weather underground on the basis that its politics were anti-working class. Others fought against printing the communiques because they were uneasy about militant politics in general. Ironically, many of us who pushed the paper's support of the Weather underground are now oriented toward a working class politics; and a key person who then opposed the prominence given to bombings and sabotage has now joined in an alliance with two long-time Weather supporters in forming the LLG.

—Several working class oriented people tried to work on the paper at various times but were discouraged from staying on. One group of these people left toward the fall of 1970 in part as a result of the paper's implicit support of the Weather underground. The alliance that eased them out consisted both of those who supported the bombings and of those who had problems with militancy. The fuzzy politics of the paper allowed all kinds of strange alliances.

—By and large, a hard core of four people kept the paper going from August 1970 until July 1971. These people set the pattern of debate about the contents of the paper. Such debate rarely reached the level of explicit politics. It was largely in terms of style, format, political “balance,” and the source of the material; and when occasionally the politics of an article was discussed, the debate was only about that particular article in isolation. At the same time, a concentration on procedures and structure was

maintained to the detriment of political direction and focus.

--A shift toward heavy emphasis on Third World liberation movements began in the fall of 1970. This resulted not from an explicit decision, but because of increased access to a lot of material on these struggles. It was easy for this material to receive the prominence it did since working class oriented people had left the paper.

--The addition of pages for grassroots news in the winter of 1971 was in part a re-affirmation of the paper's anti-elitist stance. The collective agreed that grassroots coverage was important. But this focus was supported by different people for all kinds of unstated and often contradictory purposes, including: to focus on the concrete practice of the movement as opposed to isolated research, to decrease the prominence given to sabotage, to introduce material on the working class and to tone down the overwhelming Third World emphasis.

By May 1971 almost everyone in the collective was dissatisfied with the paper and felt that it could not continue as in the past. The collective was down to four people (and was to drop to three in the course of the summer). Consequently, it was decided to cut back publishing to allow people to travel around the country to try to get a sense of where things were at and in the light of that where the paper should go (or if it should continue to exist).

Two people returned fairly certain that major political shifts were taking place in the country and that most of the movement wasn't in touch with these changes. After conferring with others in New York (including people who ended up on the other side of this split), and because of the sense of urgency created by the Jackson and Attica murders, it was decided to go ahead with the paper. New people were invited to work on it, and the re-examination of its politics was postponed. It was not until three more issues had been put out that meetings to discuss the political priorities of the paper were finally begun. In the course of these meetings the split that had long been buried finally came to the surface.

THE POLITICS OF THE SPLIT: FURTHER ASPECTS OF THE NEW LEFT'S ANTI-WORKING CLASS BIAS

We want to examine more closely now the "anti-working class" tendency in New Left politics by looking at a few of the specific issues involved in the dispute at the Liberated Guardian.

1. Is a renewal of radical working class struggles imminent? We feel that the U.S. is in a period of crisis: unemployment is cutting deeply into the working class while real wages are stagnating; all over the world, U.S. hegemony is being threatened; the international monetary system is in crisis; public services are deteriorating; the social welfare system is coming under increasing pressure; Nixon's NEP acknowledges the intensified competition between the rich capitalist countries and initiates a blow against the working class by instituting permanent regulation of wages. Given this complex situation, we feel that radical struggles may erupt once again inside the working class for the first time in decades. While we do not claim that this is inevitable, we do see it as a possibility—a possibility that should be taken seriously and acted upon. New Left radicals who do not see the working class as potentially revolutionary cannot see the significance of these developments. They ignore the history of class struggle and will eventually find their politics irrelevant.

2. Is imperialism or capitalism the problem? The New Left's focus on imperialism tends to be a substitute for attacking capitalism head-on. The argument goes: since only Third World revolution can undermine the hold of imperialism on the populations of the mother countries, the only role for radicals in advanced capitalist countries is to support "Third World" struggles. We see the importance of aiding and defending the many anti-imperialist liberation struggles which are taking place throughout the world.

But we also see that imperialism is a stage of capitalism and that it is the capitalist system as a whole which is the problem. While others are fighting to defeat imperialism and capitalism in their own countries, we must be doing more than just giving support to their struggles—we must be fighting to defeat capitalism here at home. The New Left, with its politics of support, tends to turn what could be a healthy internationalism or solidarity with other socialist revolutions into an excuse for not developing class struggle here. It also attaches little significance to class struggle in other advanced capitalist countries, such as May '68 in France and Italy's Hot Autumn of 1969. Moreover, the concept of the "Third World" in New Left thinking tends to portray revolutionary struggles solely as conflicts between countries rather than as class struggles. Although the New Left speaks of socialism, deep down many people in the New Left do not want a working class revolution. They are not prepared for it, even afraid of it, because they feel that it would not be their revolution since they do not see themselves as members of the working class.

3. **Who is in the working class?** Much of the New Left sees the working class as a small group composed mainly of factory workers and hard hats. The working class is thought of as white and male, and is dismissed as racist and sexist. We hold, however, that the working class is much broader. Most women are working class. Most Blacks and Latins are also working class. In fact, the vast majority of the population (as a rough estimate 140-170 million) is included in that class—those who do not own the means of production or who have to sell their labor power for a wage or salary.

4. **What is the relationship between racism, sexism, and class oppression?** We see racism and sexism as distinctly different from class oppression. Class is the fundamental contradiction within the system of capitalism, based on the division of people into wage-laborers and capitalists. Racism and sexism are forms of oppression used by the ruling class to divide the working class. Racism and sexism must be struggled against and overcome in order to build class solidarity within the working class and in order to achieve a truly communist society. The other side of the split treats racism and sexism as the primary contradictions to the exclusion of class. When pressed they will at best acknowledge class oppression as equivalent to racism and sexism. Such a token recognition of class oppression provides no basis for a unified revolutionary movement or for attacking even those problems which are seen by the other side as the fundamental contradictions. Racism and sexism cannot even be understood, let alone successfully attacked, unless it is seen that these are used to maintain class society.

5. **What role does culture play in revolution?** Bourgeois cultural styles and constraints—in foods, dress, hairstyles, sex, family patterns, religion, drugs, language, drama, music, art, sports, etc.—are a part of the apparatus by which the ruling class keeps people in line and at the same time masks its own power. Any genuine revolutionary struggle involves an attack on this restrictive cultural apparatus. A proletarian culture must be brought into being, but it can only emerge in the process of and as a result of the class struggle against bourgeois society. The attack on bourgeois culture must be a continuous and constantly creative attempt to build an authentic alternative and must go hand in hand with class struggle and armed struggle. Otherwise "counter-culture" can become an agent of the ruling class and a barrier to revolution. For example, approaching alienated working class people in cultural terms alone blocks the development of a revolutionary working class movement. When only cultural attacks are made, the ruling class can often adopt the new alternative as a way to renew the system and as a means of preventing the struggle from moving beyond culture to the more crucial economic and military battlegrounds. We encountered in our opponents at the LG a prickly defensiveness about questioning any aspect of the cultural configuration that has been characteristic of the New Left. In so doing, the LLG and the New Left as a whole, act out of an unwillingness to examine the class basis on which this "counter-culture" rests. They tend to substitute cultural struggle for class struggle and, perhaps unconsciously, work to keep the struggle within petty bourgeois limits.

6. **Should the "movement" be revived and strengthened?** The New Left of the sixties has collapsed, fizzled out, "died." That's one of the reasons we wanted to take stock of where we were going. The

leadership of the other side, however, claims that far from having reached its peak the "movement" has yet to attain its full revolutionary potential. They felt that the role of the LG should be to help recreate this movement and to repoliticize people who had dropped out of politics—or to help "organize kids." We believe that students and youth will always play an important role in the struggle. But if it is to be a *revolutionary* struggle, they must act out of a class perspective and *as a part of* the effort of all the oppressed classes of society. We see the current state of U.S. society as leading to the renewal of radical working class struggles. In seeking to revive the isolated "youth movement" the people who walked out of the LG appear to be misreading the situation. Both this misreading and their refusal to see student or youth movements within a class perspective are directly related to their anti-working class politics. They are unable to move in the direction obviously demanded by the times—and the only direction that moves toward revolution.

7. Can youth alone make the revolution? In virtually every revolution the overwhelming majority of the active participants are young—people not yet locked into the system as fully as their elders, with a high level of hope and confidence and less demoralized by years of oppression. There is no reason to assume that this will not be the case in the U.S. However, we have encountered in the LLG and in the New Left as a whole a politics that tends to assume that *solely* young people have a revolutionary potential or that the political experience of older people is irrelevant. This kind of youth chauvinism excludes immense sections of the population without whose active participation a revolution cannot succeed. It also functions as a way to avoid class analysis. It encourages people to identify themselves in terms of age groupings rather than class and leads radicals to direct their energy into "organizing youth" rather than into building struggles along class lines. This tendency serves to keep the serious class limitations of the New Left from coming to light and also stands as a direct obstacle to the development of class struggle.

THE FIGHT AGAINST ELITISM; THE FUNCTIONS OF ANTI-ELITISM

The struggle against elitism was a basic concern in the formation of the Liberated Guardian. The refusal to continue to work in the elitist structure of the old Guardian was perhaps the only issue which united the people involved in that split. Over the last two years many of us have spent much of our time fighting elitist tendencies and practices in many political contexts.

We feel that it is important that organizations be structured and decisions be made in a democratic manner. Revolution must be made *by* the people rather than by a vanguard *for* the people. However, we are not sure exactly how to make that happen—how to democratically structure a group or an organization in a functional manner, how best to make our ideas known to others and learn and discuss their ideas, and how to carry out the political and military work of building revolution.

In recent months many of us have felt the need to reexamine some of the ways anti-elitism has been used in the New Left. At times political groups have become almost totally preoccupied with the question of elitism to the exclusion of other issues. In other instances the issue of elitism has been used to obscure basic political struggles over questions like the significance of class and the role of the underground. Individuals have frequently been attacked for being elitist as a means of avoiding the issues they raise. Finally, charges of elitism have also been raised by some people as a means of gaining power for themselves.

The people who walked out in the LG split objected to the paper's developing a clear and explicit politics on the grounds that it would be elitist for a group of 3-20 people to do so. Throughout the history of the paper, people who ended up on both sides of the split used similar arguments against the paper's taking positions, writing editorials, or printing articles with strong stands. These are examples of using the question of elitism to avoid struggle and change.

As a result of the struggle at the LG, we have come to recognize an implicit elitism in the politics of most of the New Left. Although endorsing the idea of ant-elitism and fighting against hierarchical structures of the Old Left, the New Left developed a less up front kind of elitism. Instead of having an isolated party to lead the revolution, the New Left substituted an isolated "movement" of independent categories of "revolutionaries." The working class, the overwhelming majority of the population, is either completely excluded from the New Left's analysis, is seen as a group which might come along some day but which is not essential, or is assumed to be hostile because the "racist and sexist working class will refuse to give up its privileges." Thus their revolution will have to be fought without or even against most of the people in this country.

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

The people who walked out have moved to consolidate their position by publishing their "liberated" *Liberated Guardian* (LLG). Several months ago we might well have put out a paper like this. But now that the implicit politics have become clear to us we see such a paper in a very different light. It is a good example of petty bourgeois, pluralist New Left philosophy. All the movement "categories" are represented. There are articles on the Indochina war, GI's, youth culture, blacks, women, a lot of news about the Third World, communiques from the underground, a poem about lesbians, songs by John and Yoko and by Bob Dylan (with a critique of the authors' life styles but not of their politics), prison revolts, drugs, the whole works. Finally, as might be expected, there is token treatment of the working class—just one more group among many. But, as could also be expected, there is no explicit statement of the LLG's politics. In their brief reference to the split, they mention that there were issues but do not bother to inform the reader what positions they took on these issues.

The split at the *Liberated Guardian* was a fight between two groups of petty bourgeois radicals. We are determined not to spend the rest of our lives fighting pseudo-battles like this. A war between the working class and the ruling class—yes; struggles within the working class over strategy and tactics—yes; but *not* quarrels among petty bourgeois radicals.

There are some disagreements among us. These include: (1) What kind of working class politics to pursue; (2) The precise definition of the working class; (3) How best to fight sexism and racism while building a socialist revolution; (4) Whether or not parties and vanguards should exist, and if so, what their role and function should be; (5) The nature of leadership; (6) The nature of sectarianism; (7) How directly to deal with the obstacles arising from class-based cultural differences in building a working class movement and whether or not it is useful to refer to the attitudes stemming from these differences as "classism." These disagreements run pretty deep but we have not really explored them very thoroughly. Nor have we begun to consider what a genuinely proletarian society would look like.

The main problem facing us now has to do with our own class position and class identity. It is not impossible to change one's class position. The question of class identity, orientation, or outlook, however, is a more difficult one. After 25-35 years of having a petty bourgeois orientation, how is it possible to change our class identity? For a start, we can begin to neglect or sever our ties with the petty bourgeoisie. But how can we begin to look at the world from a position inside the working class rather than outside it? This won't be easy.

We spent one evening just trying to enumerate all our known connections with working class people. It was not very encouraging. We could go on forever listing our ties with the petty bourgeoisie but our ties with the working class were fewer and somehow more distant. It is painfully obvious to all of us that we are not accustomed to relating to working class people, but rather to our petty bourgeois friends in the movement and elsewhere. We are undoubtedly not even free from subtle or unsuspecting influences from the ruling class. If we are to become relevant to a proletarian revolution we must radically change the context of our lives, where we live and who we associate with, and the kind of politics we practice. We recognize that we cannot undergo these changes in isolation from active participation in ongoing working class struggles.

We are looking forward to making contacts with groups we think are significant and to furthering our political development and education. We feel that everyone who is serious about the struggle against capitalism must become a part of and work to build the world wide proletarian revolution.

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