MAOISM IN AUSTRALIA

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The organised Maoist movement in Australia is going through difficulties. The last twelve months have dented some of their simplistic certainties. Up till then, all seemed very simple to them, the world was divided into pure revolutionaries on the one hand and revisionists and traitors and counter-revolutionaries on the other. There were simple tests to decide which category one belonged to. China supported the oppressed people everywhere and unconditionally. The policies seemed clear, consistent and predictable.

At the same time the local Maoists, mainly centred in Melbourne round the Worker Student Alliance and what is left of Ted Hill’s Communist Party (ML), gave some of the Chinese policies their own dogmatic interpretation.

The changes in Chinese policies consequently caught them quite unprepared and embarrassed. The events in Ceylon in April 1971, the struggle in Pakistan, and the Nixon visit to China did not fit into the picture that the readers of Vanguard (Ted Hill’s paper) and the members of the WSA had been fed on.

Because of the considerable influence of Ted Hill on the outlook and mode of thinking of the organised young Maoists and the “educational” role of Vanguard and similar Hillites publications, it is necessary to say something about the history of this group which puts its own particular imprint on the leading cadres of the WSA.

As a result of the differences and subsequent split between the Soviet Union and China, small groups that proclaimed their adherence to China emerged in a number of established Communist Parties in the early sixties. In Australia such a grouping was formed under the leadership of E. F. Hill, the former Victorian Secretary of the CPA. After a partywide discussion in 1963 as a result of which the policies advocated by E. F. Hill were overwhelmingly rejected by the CPA membership, Ted Hill broke away from the CPA and established a separate organisation named the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist). He took about 200 with him out of the CPA.

Essentially this group was and remained confined to Victoria where E. F. Hill’s personal and political influence had been greatest. Naturally the group publicly proclaimed its complete adherence to the stated Chinese policies at the time. But in attempting to mechanically apply those policies to the quite different situation in Australia, a relatively advanced capitalist country, the group inevitably blocked any possibility of becoming a viable political force. What made sense in China, just became farcical when it was mechanically transplanted to Australia. From the very beginning no attempt was made to analyse the Australian reality, still less to elaborate any kind of revolutionary strategy for Australia.

In fact E. F. Hill felt no need for such an examination. The group confined itself in the main to proclaiming and re-proclaiming each week in the columns of its paper Vanguard the same old eternal truths about the evils of capitalism and the onset of the economic crisis. Its headline invariably proclaimed that the Australian people were uniting and rising against US imperialism. It was a dull, repetitive and highly general paper, and each week it repeated much of what had been said the week before. It denounced what it called revisionism and went in for a great deal of personal abuse. Because of past personal loyalty to E. F. Hill of some of the Victorian communist trade union officials, this group retained some trade union positions. However its pro-Chinese policies were frequently kept out of trade union activities.

It was characteristic of E. F. Hill that he now dogmatically and unconditionally supported every policy and action of China, just as he had previously equally dogmatically and unconditionally supported every policy and action of the Soviet leadership. As late as 1959, after returning from the 21st Congress of the CPSU he wrote a glowing report about the Soviet Union. In a pamphlet called Builders of Communism he stated: “To me words are not adequate to describe fully the grand picture of the new way of life in the Soviet Union. . .” “The Communist Party of the Soviet Union leads the Soviet people.” “Everything it does is for the interests and advancement of the Soviet people.” “The spirit and enthusiasm of Soviet workers is something that has to be experienced.”

Hill, an authoritarian himself, always needed a supreme authority. Shortly after writing the above he simply transferred from one “authority” to another. One who consistently proclaimed Stalin’s primitive treatise on Dialectical and Historical Materialism as a masterpiece, who was always attracted by the most dogmatic and uncreative
It is interesting to recall that when this writer returned to Australia at the end of 1956 after a prolonged stay in China, considerably impressed with the Chinese attitudes and methods, Hill strongly denounced "Chinese liberalism" and ridiculed their efforts to critically examine their own concrete situation and their attention to people's ideologies (their views, attitudes, approaches and feelings). The Chinese emphasis on remoulding man conditioned in an exploitative society, were the special target of Hill's sarcastic scorn during the latter fifties.

Hill certainly tolerated no criticism inside the CPA itself and ruled in a rigid authoritarian manner. He played a major part in suppressing any serious discussion on the problems posed by Khrushchov's revelations at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956. It is little wonder that after the split the Hill group maintained a shadowy existence and was subject to growing internal division and jealousies.

Yet, as with some of the young who are attached to the WSA today, the people who followed Ted Hill in 1963 included a number of active and competent people. The reason for that was that the influence of the CPA was tending to decline, it did not face up to the realities in Australia, it did not attempt to elaborate a serious socialist strategy for Australia, rather it continued to base itself on outdated strategic assumptions, which were increasingly felt to be out of line with our experience and needs. It was in face of these difficulties that Hill switched his attachment, rather than face up to the hard, serious and independent work necessary to examine these problems and draw the necessary strategic conclusions from them.

In this Hill was not alone, of course; other CPA leaders at the time were attracted to the Chinese more militant position on a number of questions in dispute between the Russians and the Chinese. But to Hill the alternatives were always attachment to the USSR or China. An independent elaboration of policies and attitudes was outside his frame of reference. In this he was and remains completely at variance with the tradition of both the Russian and the Chinese revolutions. Both Lenin and Mao Tse-tung elaborated their revolutionary strategies as a result of, and only as a result of, an independent analysis of the specific conditions of their own countries.

The people who went with Ted Hill reflected this situation. There were those who were active, militant and impatient, but also dogmatists and bureaucrats. Hill took a large proportion of the full-time Victorian party officials as well as a number of trade union officials with him. Ironically it was the departure of Hill and the big section of the party apparatus that went with him that removed some of the barriers to the subsequent independent development of the CPA.

Meanwhile the new revolutionary upsurge began in the mid-sixties. The growing questioning and rejection of the values of capitalist society by some of the young, was coupled with a disillusionment with the USSR, and the feeling that it had become a conservative force, as, they believed, had the Communist Party of Australia. In this situation the attraction of China as an alternative model of a socialist society grew among the radicalised youth. China seemed to challenge the established authorities, including the USSR, she appeared to place moral considerations ahead of material ones and adopt anti-bureaucratic measures. The Cultural Revolution was seen by many as an attack on entrenched authority and as an attempt to prevent the degeneration of the revolution, to prevent the return "to the capitalist road."

China appeared as the genuine champion of the oppressed and under-privileged everywhere, opposed to the two super-powers, the USA and the USSR, who were competing but also co-operating in the attempt to control the rest of the world. It seemed that China, unlike the USSR, was not putting its own State interests ahead of the interest of the world revolutionary movement. Internally it promoted communal living and seemed closer to the ideals of an egalitarian society. Many of those who were repelled by the irrationality and hypocrisy of our society were attracted to China as the alternative. Those visiting China were clearly impressed with the advances made and by the enthusiasm they met in the country. The stirring call that "to rebel is justified" struck a chord in the hearts of many a radicalised youth wanting to change society.

It was in this atmosphere that the Maoist youth organisation which grew out of the Monash Labor Club was established. The leading cadres of what became the WSA were closely associated with Ted Hill and the CP (M-L) and absorbed its elitist attitudes and its highly authoritarian structure. At the same time they attracted a number of young radicals, although they were not able to hold many of them.

There were several reasons for this attraction. Firstly, there was the identification with Chipa. Secondly, the activism of the group attracted those who wanted to DO things. Thirdly, they provided simple, easily understood "answers" to complex problems. Simplistic answers have a certain attraction, at least temporarily, for those who are new to the revolutionary movement. You don't have to think, the truth is clear, even "obvious". With this went a strong belief — nourished by the political atmosphere in the universities — that the revolution was round the corner. In the absence of any real contact with the working class masses some of the WSA cadres came to believe that all that stood between the working class and revolution in Australia were a few "revisionist" trade union leaders.

The real harm lies in what the group did to
some of the young people that it attracted to its ranks. It introduced them or rather subjected them to a brand of “Marxism” which is a caricature of Marx and Lenin’s views and runs counter to many of Mao Tse-tung’s own stated attitudes. These are some of the typical features:

- It trained its members to regard critical thought as being alien to Marxism. Open discussion, a clash of views, was seen as wrong and dangerous. It based itself on Stalin, rather than on Marx and Lenin, who regarded critical thought and free debate as essential to the revolutionary movement and for the future socialist society.

- With this goes an attitude of utter intolerance to other groups and viewpoints inside the revolutionary movement. The group revived the Stalinist precept that the main enemy is the one closest to your own position and that the main blow is to be directed at him (since he is most likely to deceive the masses). Jill Joliffe, who herself grew up politically in this group, notes in retrospect that “the struggle against ‘revisionism’ loomed larger than ‘the struggle against capitalism’.” (Socialist Review, Feb. 1972.)

- They have absorbed some of the worst Stalinist traits and attitudes and have even taken some of them further. Believing themselves to be the only true revolutionaries, they regard any means as justified to defeat their political opponents. Truth matters little, arguments are distorted and misrepresented. Their style of work is highly manipulative, anything goes as long as it achieves their purpose.

- Their dogmatism, their blind copying of foreign slogans and forms of struggle and attempting to apply them to quite different situations in Australia — such as the call for the Australian workers to arm themselves and for a People’s Army here in our conditions — produces some grotesque results.

- Feature of their dogmatism is the extraordinarily primitive approach. By refusing to discuss, or being unable to discuss, political issues seriously and by reducing student politics to 24-hour slogan shouting, they have created an adverse reaction to politics generally among many students. The reaction to this is often “if this is politics I want nothing of it”.

- Because of their primitive attitudes they tend to personalise their politics. They can only focus on individuals (individual enemies) rather on social forces and movements. Hence the individual policeman becomes the main object of attack rather than the institutionalised role of the police force.

- As well as a preoccupation with the individual policeman they have the primitive view that fights with the police will radicalise the victims of police action. This is certainly not always the case, especially if police reaction and over-reaction is artificially induced as a result of such a theory.

- The same simplistic attitude is expressed in the slogans that they advance. It is frequently concerned with smashing something — be it US imperialism, capitalism or even inflation. The trouble with such a slogan is that it appeals only to those already convinced.

In preparation for the April 21 demonstration, Struggle (March 21, ’72) informed its readers that “WSA is producing a large number of stickers with various slogans including Smash Inflation on April 21.” Since WSA’s own political diet is rather meagre, they readily absorb the diet dished out by Vanguard, which revived Stalin’s theory of “social fascism”. Under the heading: “Labor Reformists and Revisionists are part of Fascism”, Vanguard, October 8, 1970, stated:

... the struggle against fascism is primarily the struggle against reformism and revisionism and the bourgeois sacred cows they both support, parliamentarism and orthodox trade unionism.

Long ago Stalin said that social democracy (labor party reformism) was the moderate wing of fascism.

In concentrating their fire exclusively on the exposure of the Number One Enemy, US imperialism, they leave the Australian capitalists out of the line of fire, and often let them get off scot free. The blind copying of a foreign slogan had some amusing consequences, when recently the local Maoists added Japan to the list of enemies after Chou En-lai’s statement to this effect.

In the belief that simplistic answers are the whole and sole truth, such people defend the Stalinist terror and physical destruction of tens of thousands of devoted communists and socialists. They sneer at socialist humanism and advocate the suppression of free debate even for fellow socialists in a socialist society. Their model of socialism is as defective as their tactics to achieve it. If their kind of socialism ever comes many socialists will not be alive to participate in it.

Those who have a primitive view of social change and who substitute pseudo-left phraseology for revolutionary activities which reach out to the masses of the people, generally have a corresponding attitude to the kind of socialist society they want. It is usually an elitist attitude which ignores or neglects the mass movement, and which involves manipulation of supporters, substitution of sloganising, empty cliches and abuse or worse for serious discussion of socialist society.

Underlying such attitudes and approaches are certain assumptions about the perspective for social change. They can briefly be summed up as follows:

They believe that the capitalist system in Australia is only maintained by force and suppres-
They believe that making revolution is a simple matter of announcing the "truth" and of presenting the "true slogans" and that by creating confrontation situations (almost irrespective of the issue involved) you can force the system to use force and show its real nature. This they believe, is the way to open people's eyes and to bring about a revolution in Australia.

An organisation brought up in that intellectual and cultural climate, with its lack of knowledge of Marxism, has found it especially difficult to adjust to the recent changes in Chinese policies.

The first big thing that really burst on them were the events in Ceylon in April 1971. When the news of the armed uprising reached this country Vanguard on May 13, 1971, on the front page under the heading "Armed Struggle in Ceylon", stated the following:

The people of Ceylon have taken to arms against the great tea plantation owners, against exploitation. There are people who say they should not have done it or their politics were wrong or some other lament. But they did take to arms: they did get mass support. We think it is all fine. No doubt they will find the correct political guidance in the course of protracted struggle. Their efforts to date have revealed the essential capitalist character of the "left" Mrs. Bandaranaike and the revisionist Communists in her cabinet and their efforts have revealed the coalescing of all reactionary forces to put down rebellion by the people.

Unhappily for Vanguard a few days later Chou En-lai joined what Vanguard called "the coalescing of all reactionary forces to put down the rebellion by the people" by his public support for Mrs. Bandaranaike. In a message to her he stated:

Following Chairman Mao Tse-tung's teaching the Chinese people have all along opposed ultra "left" and right opportunism in their protracted revolutionary struggles. We are glad to see that thanks to the efforts of Your Excellency and the Ceylon Government, the chaotic situation created by a handful of persons who style themselves "Guevarists" and into whose ranks foreign spies have sneaked has been brought under control. We believe that as a result of Your Excellency's leadership and co-operation and support of the Ceylonese people these acts of rebellion plotted by reactionaries at home and abroad have been defeated and the people of Ceylon are bound to fail.

In the interests of friendship between China and Ceylon and in consideration of the needs of the Ceylon Government, the Chinese Government in compliance with the request of the Ceylon Government agrees to provide it with a long-term interest free loan of 150 million dollars in convertible foreign exchange. We would like to hear any views which you might have on this matter. We are prepared to deliver a portion of the loan in May and sign a document on it. As for other material assistance, please let us know if it is needed. (Ceylon Daily News, May 27, 1971.) If indeed Vanguard had made a mistake should