

Thoughts on Maoism

Wildcat

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Contents

Introduction by the Angry Workers of the World	3
Maoism is a poisonous weed	5
<i>... which unfortunately is still growing</i>	6
<i>Maintained by an obscene leader cult...</i>	7
<i>... and brutal population policies</i>	8

Introduction by the Angry Workers of the World

We want to use the opportunity to say a few words about Maoism from our perspective, primarily on an anecdotal level. First of all we feel it is necessary to explain why we are still talking about Maoism today. Here are some examples of initiatives within 'our milieu' where Maoism has a problematic influence.

A few groups within the 'base building tendency' in the US and perhaps in the UK use Maoist vocabulary and aspects of its ideology. From the actual idea of 'base building' (who is the base and for what?) to the call to 'serve the people' (who are the people and why serving them?). We understand the impetus of the comrades: instead of re-hashing electoral politics or staying within the bubble of the 'movement' they suggest to 'go to the people' and deal with their day to day problems. Their main framework here is not the 'working class' as a social group that already has a social relationship and collective practice within the work process, but 'the poor' in the territory that need to be joined together in campaigns. We still think that the 'base building tendency' is an interesting development and want to discuss with comrades involved in it.

A second current tendency where Maoism plays a role is the regional struggle in Rojava, Kurdistan. Comrades might say that the Maoist days of the PKK are over and that the leadership has embraced libertarian communal theories, but 'ideological twists and turns' depending on tactical manoeuvres is the prime feature of Maoism, e.g. to get off the list of international terrorist organisations, to garner support from the European and US (liberal) left and military aid from various states. We understand the urge of comrades to support a regional struggle that proclaims to be internationalist, feminist and anti-authoritarian, but both personal experiences with PKK related groups – see below – and the devastating historical results of regional liberation struggles for the working class, ring our alarm bells.

The Wildcat article mentions a few reasons why Maoism seemed like an attractive alternative to the old left, in the form of the Communist Party or social democratic party formations. We can mention a few more:

There is an 'anarchistic' element in Maoism. The 'spontaneous' struggle of 'the people' and its often chaotic nature is embraced as a necessary process of collective learning. Revolutionaries, in particular from the middle-class, are supposed to 'de-classify' by renouncing their material privileges and their bookish knowledge. They are supposed to first go and live with, and listen to, the people. The questioning of one's own consciousness is encouraged, one's own mind portrayed as a battlefield of reactionary and progressive thoughts and sentiments. Last, but not least, Maoism tends to favour the 'most downtrodden', which could be the Afro-American poor in the USA or the indigenous tribal 'adivasi' population in the Indian jungle areas. There are important elements in all of this.

The problem is the Maoist mis-understanding of what makes class struggle revolutionary. Many upheavals are initially led by the 'marginalised sections' of the working class, but without links to the world of production these upheavals are either smashed or they turn towards alliances with the (national, religious, fascist, mafia-type etc.) middle-class. Maoism has little understanding of the productive sphere and workers' antagonistic collectivity within and therefore mirrors the unstable character of their chosen 'revolutionary subject': they either engage in a suicidal, martyr-fetishising cult of violence and/or form tactical alliances with the enemy force. The challenge is to find organic links between the marginal and core working class. Maoism also intertwines personal and semi-psychological elements of 'de-classification' with ideological jus-

tifications for 'personal authority' and violent para-state structures, which is the perfect mix to create the most vile sects. Remember Brixton?

Some anecdotal experiences with Maoism. In Germany in the 1990s the PKK and the Maoist Turkish Parties were the biggest organisations of the 'far left'. There were people killed in Berlin when rivalling Maoist organisations fought each other. We had contacts to Kurdish families and supported them, being attracted by the community spirit and political dedication. Once you saw more of the internal structures, things were less pretty. In Kurdistan, the PKK stopped land occupations early on in their development in order not to piss off the 'Kurdish' landowners, who supported the 'national' struggle financially. This included Islamic fundamentalists. Comrades told us how they had to attend PKK training camps in Kurdistan as teenagers and were forced to shoot 'traitors' as a form of initiation. The cult around Ocalan was combined with a martyr cult. We attended demos where people tried to set themselves on fire, which was celebrated as an act of heroism. People who were critical of the organisation were threatened. Involvement in people and drug smuggling to finance the military actions in Kurdistan seemed more than just 'nasty rumours spread by the Turkish state'. Together with Turkish-Kurdish comrades we encouraged working class PKK members to discuss their situations as workers in Germany and to get organised. This was seen as a threat to the PKK and discouraged in all kind of forms, by using moralistic arguments ("people are dying back home") or by pointing out that the middle-class elements are needed to finance the organisation.

A decade later we met comrades in India who used to be part of the Maoist CPI/ML as the only organisation on the left that opposed the state of emergency of the Indira Gandhi government in the 1970s. They told us how they were sent to the countryside to organise the 'self-sufficient' adivasi populations and the peasantry, only to find out that these had already become wage workers. When they pointed this out to the party bosses and suggested focusing the party efforts on wage workers they were expelled from the party. Maoism in India split in the late 1970s. One faction focused on building the peoples army in remote areas, others started focusing on wage workers. In the rural areas, Maoists often build ties with regionalist movements, often leading to violent political in-fights and massacres. Military warfare needs resources, so the Maoist organisations tax local capitalists – and repress strikes of workers of these capitalists, because 'they had already paid their dues'. The military logic and state repression creates a spiral: each village in certain areas of the so-called 'tribal belt' is seen as either a 'pro-Maoist' or 'anti-Maoist' camp, with massacres from both sides. The Maoist organisations have little interest in the urban working poor, but prefer to focus on the liberal middle-class as ambassadors for the cause. For them India is still 'semi-feudal' and an alliance with the progressive national bourgeoisie is needed for a democratic revolution. In the urban areas, those factions who decided to focus on the wage working class often display the contradictions of most vanguardist parties. Most of the young comrades are from middle-class backgrounds, the party leaders encourage them to organise workers during their time at university, while they themselves stay in the background in their professional jobs. Various small organisations compete for influence amongst workers and they use anti-working class tactics to do so. At JNU university in Delhi, one of the organisations supported construction workers and encouraged an action that would most likely result in victimisation, because they saw this as 'beneficial for the campaign'. And there is a logic as mainly those workers join the organisations who have been sacked and then paraded as victims. The organisations support them, in return they became the 'organisation's show-piece workers'. A lot of these young comrades work tirelessly, but the party's tactics are most likely to wear them out.

These are anecdotes, but they fit the overall picture of an opportunistic and essentially authoritarian ideology.

Maoism is a poisonous weed

(Wildcat issue no.105 – Spring 2020)

John Lennon knew it: *“But if you go carrying pictures of Chairman Mao / You ain’t gonna make it with anyone anyhow”* ... which was recorded at the end of the album *Revolution Number 9*.¹

Our “China-Trilogy” in the issues 102 to 104 started with a misunderstanding, you could even call it a manipulation (see our explanations in the Wildcat 104 p. 36 f.) We should have noticed it! In the article about Jasic in the Wildcat 102 the usual fairy tales were told, similar to those you used to read in the German Maoist paper *Rote Fahne* [Red Flag]: „Because the vehicle that workers used to move their modest belongings, “a borrowed electric tricycle, blocked a road... a BMW driver got excited and hit it with a padlock”; or a worker sees on her way to work in the morning “how a street vendor is badly harassed by the public order office. She immediately intervenes and succeeds in getting his cooking utensils handed over, but she is dragged to a police station for several hours” and so on.

The accompanying pictures of the article were almost Maoist family photos, which also clearly revealed the minority character of the actions at Jasic! A very small minority, a group of maybe half a dozen people, starts an action, and shortly afterwards starts collecting signatures in the factory to found a trade union... These are the usual shitty tactics of Maoist vanguard politicians to drag people into their affairs. At no time was this anything like a strike. We had also tried to make direct contact with workers at Jasic; we were denied this as “too dangerous”. We shouldn’t have called the actions at Jasic a “workers’ struggle” in our magazine!

The older ones among us are especially hurt because we have been ‚defeated‘ three times by the Maoist milieu. In the wake of the strike wave of 1969, many people had the idea that one should ‚go to the workers‘, best by going to the factories and working there oneself. The K-groups [various Marxist-Leninist and Maoist parties formed during the late 1960s] succeeded in turning this into the distorted image of ‚factory intervention‘, with a caricature of the heroic, industrious blue-collar worker. They started strikes that usually ended badly for the workers involved – just so that they could announce ‚successes‘ in their own party papers and run campaigns for years for the reinstatement of ‚dismissed colleagues‘. In their expectations of revolution they lived in a world of their own.

In 1975 the Red Army Faction lawyer Horst Mahler refused to be released in exchange for Peter Lorenz, who had been kidnapped by the June 2 movement, because the masses of workers would soon carry him out of prison on their shoulders. At that time he was in the Maoist KPD/AO, he later became a prominent fascist. At the end of the 70s Maoism defeated us again. Largely

¹ Lennon did not mean the CCP’s internal strategy paper of 2012, “which warns of Western values and their spread” (wikipedia). But this: During the Cultural Revolution, the “four black categories” (counterrevolutionaries, bad elements, landowners and rich peasants) were combined with the newly invented category of right-wingers to “five black elements”. Then old bourgeoisie and pro-capitalists were added, resulting in “eight black elements”. The peak was reached when “the stinking number nine” (“traitors”, “agents” and “bourgeois intellectuals”) was added.

out of Mahler's experience of disillusionment (the working masses had not come to his rescue, instead the 'hero nations' China and Vietnam had waged war against each other) the Green Party was born. Ex-Maoists were at the forefront of the Green Party formation, people such as Trittin (from KB to the Greens), Prime Minister Kretschmann (from KBW to the Greens) and many others. What is much worse, however, is that the Greens succeeded in integrating a broad extra-parliamentary movement back into the parliamentary system and turning an anti-militarist movement against the war into the 'peace movement' of the 1980s. A Green foreign minister (who had not been a Maoist but an operaist) and Joschka Schmieder, the head of the KBW for many years, who now sat on the planning staff of the Foreign Office, led the first war mission of the Bundeswehr in 1999. At the beginning of the 1990s, the leaders of the anti-Germans² also came largely from Maoism. Jürgen Elsässer, former KB, even claims to have coined the term 'anti-German'.² The fact that he has meanwhile developed into a fascist is not so rare among Maoists and anti-Germans. Gedeon, the former anti-Semitic right-winger in the AfD of Baden-Württemberg, comes from the KPD/ML (in the meantime he has been expelled from the AfD).

... which unfortunately is still growing

Maoism has led (in some cases to this day) to insurgency movements and the take-over of or participation in governments in Cambodia, Zimbabwe, Peru, India, Nepal, etc. Its influence within the trade union hierarchy in France, Italy and Germany is firmly anchored, many trade union leaders and works council chairmen are former Maoists. The worldwide structures of left-wing Maoists within (elite) universities have been briefly revealed by the Jasic case... Maoism still seems to be a viable strategy to gain power. Otherwise, the great influence of this anti-intellectual ideology in the academic milieu is difficult to explain. And already at the end of the 1960s it was hard to explain why Maoism could bring so much misery to the worldwide youth movement: Not only in Germany the K-groups quickly became hegemonic, but also in many other countries the 'Maos' set the style and determined the debates. One reason for this was certainly this huge 'socialist China', which at that time was also incredibly far away. Today people like to forget that Foucault was also a Maoist at that time; one of the worst kind: Gauche Proletarienne. Ten years later, he raved about the "Islamic Revolution" in Iran...

A second reason was certainly the tremendous simplicity and "flexibility" in thinking, as it becomes clear for example in the 'Mao Bible', the Little Red Book:

"All reactionaries are paper tigers." "Those who rest on their laurels wear them in the wrong place." "Criticism should come at the right time. One must not get into the habit of criticising only after the disaster has happened." "A revolution is not a banquet, an essay-writing, a picture-painting, a doily" "One can abolish war only by war; he who does not want the rifle must take the rifle" "Dogma is worth less than a cowpat" "We Communists are like seeds, and the people are like the soil." "Fight, succumb, fight again,

² 'Anti-Germans' were a political tendency in Germany that formed in the late 1980s. They referred primarily to the Frankfurter Schule (Adorno etc.). In their support for the state in Israel they attacked the anti-war movement against the US-led Gulf war in 1990. They denounced anyone who spoke of class politics in Germany as proto-fascist, as they regarded all non-enlightened people in Germany as right-wing anti-Semites.

succumb again, fight again and so on until victory – that is the logic of the people, and the people will never go against that logic. That is a law of Marxism.”³

These were sayings that were easy to learn by heart and used as trump cards in internal discussions. Mao’s great saying from the beginning of the Cultural Revolution “Rebellion is justified” was still sprayed by the disciples of the Shining Path on every wall in Kreuzberg in the 1990s! “Consistent materialists are intrepid people... Who is not afraid of being quartered, dares to pull the emperor from his horse” The saying even found its way into a hunger strike declaration of the RAF. They could certainly have found better sayings in soldier Schwejk that were closer to reality.

Even blatant lies circulated in the ‚Mao Bible‘ became unquestioned truths from which political strategies were developed: “*Political power comes from the barrel of a gun.*” “*Everything the enemy is fighting against, we must support; everything the enemy supports, we must fight.*”

A third reason for the great appeal of Maoism was that it emphasised the importance of the local. Against the centralist ideas in the Soviet Union, Maoism wanted to encircle the cities from the country. This seemed to capture the dynamics of the anti-colonial movement. And on the other hand, your local practice had an immediate world historical significance.

One last reason might be seen in the fact that Mao’s ‚materialism‘ presented itself as a ‚scientific law‘. “In class struggle, certain classes win while others are destroyed. This is the course of history, this is the history of civilisation for thousands of years. Explaining history from this point of view is called historical materialism; taking the opposite point of view is called historical idealism.”

In reality, however, he preached unbridled voluntarism: “the will moves mountains”, “everything” can be achieved with “iron discipline”, or see above: “Consistent materialists... drag the Emperor from his horse.” In this voluntarism there lies a parallel to Lenin: the leading role of the party, the peasant question, the national question, the relationship of the Comintern to the national parties. At almost all of these points, Mao takes over Lenin’s opportunism and intensifies it. Negri – who was very aware of this Lenin-Mao parallel! – even surpasses Mao in his “Lectures on Lenin” by declaring that “dialectics are a weapon of the proletariat”. He thus placed himself in the tradition of both communist parties, where ‚dialectic‘ was a cover-up term for the fact that today one can say this and tomorrow the opposite, and only one principle is eternal: “the party is always right”. No wonder that dialectics have fallen into disrepute!

Maintained by an obscene leader cult...

In the People’s Republic of China, founded in 1949, a bureaucratic class developed very quickly; as early as 1955, these cadres consumed almost ten percent of the state budget – the CP China had planned a ceiling of five percent. By the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, this proportion had grown to thirty percent. The various campaigns of Mao (“Let a hundred flowers bloom”, “The Great Leap Forward”, “Cultural Revolution”) can all be read as an attempt, on the one hand, to repeatedly impose the political leadership of the CCP on this layer of bureaucrats, and, on the other hand, to use this layer to keep ‚the people‘ under control and exploit them. (Maoism has no class analysis, but rather divides the population quite arbitrarily into about 50 “classes” that decide on access to resources). During these campaigns and various additional mobilisations, Mao

³ We know that it is unprofessional, but we could not be bothered to find the original English translations of the Mao quotes.

and his entourage repeatedly gave out target figures. For example: five percent of the population were ‚reactionary‘ and therefore ‚to be eliminated‘. Such policies could affect as much as fifteen percent of the population that needed to be ‚disciplined‘, ‚controlled‘ or ‚rendered harmless‘. A great role was also played by the millions of people who were sent into sheer misery in the countryside, where even with 12 hours of daily hard work they were not able to sustain themselves. The “Great Leap Forward” at the end of the 1950s had brought about one of the greatest famines in the history of mankind, with 15 to 45 million dead (Felix Wemheuer reckons with 30 to 40 million). The campaign was stopped in 1961. Five years later, Mao launched the next campaign and triggered a civil war with the “Cultural Revolution”, whose repression by the military – also ordered by him – again cost more than a million dead. In his book ‚China under Mao – A revolution derailed‘ of 2015, Andrew G. Walder estimates that between 1.5 and 1.8 million people died. He puts the number of victims of direct persecution at 22- 30 million, and those indirectly affected by persecution at 106 to 150 million. “Most of the victims were neither the Red Guards in 1966, nor the armed faction fights in 1967. Most people were killed in 1968 and 1969, when the army carried out ‘purge campaigns’ from above after the restoration of order.” (Felix Wemheuer: The Western European New Left and the Chinese Cultural Revolution; in: “From Politics and Contemporary History” 66th Volume 23/2016)

... and brutal population policies

The CCP is a campaign party that repeatedly combines mass mobilisation and violence. Since it came to power in 1949, it has resorted to these means in all crisis situations. Within a very short time, the party headquarters can switch to crisis mode, pushing aside bureaucratic rules and apparatuses and sending huge shock waves through the entire system that make resistance near to impossible. Tough collective disciplinary measures such as during the Corona epidemic are the natural playing field for the CP. This kind of emergency mobilisation is in their DNA. Currently, one-tenth of the Uighurs are in re-education camps. These are normal dimensions in Chinese domestic politics since Mao’s time. It works less from a policing point of view than with the fear that these camps (or, in the past, the land deportations) cause among the rest of the population. The CCP is an extremely successful machine in ‚moving‘ huge masses of people. After the ‚Great Leap‘ experiment had to be abandoned in 1961, 20 to 25 million industrial workers were dismissed and sent to the countryside within two years. As a result, they also lost their valuable urban residence status. In this context, Mao spoke proudly of the power and efficiency of the Chinese communist state in the comprehensive restructuring of labor: „Twenty million people can be rounded up from one minute to the next and dismissed again with a simple show of hands. If the Communist Party were not in power, who would be able to accomplish such an achievement?” This quote can be found on page 148 in the German translation of the book ‚The Cultural Revolution at the margins‘, published by Mandelbaum Publishing House in 2019.

It was published in the English original in 2014: The Cultural Revolution at the Margins.⁴ We will discuss the book in the next Wildcat. In the second, and especially the third phase of the Cultural Revolution, large sections of the Chinese working class turned Mao’s call for rebellion and rebelled against precisely these forms of population policies (land deportation, mass layoffs, temporary employment). More on this in the next issue.

⁴ libcom.org

PS. The history of Maoism is also marked by fierce internal struggles and mutual slaughter. The Jasic campaign is no exception. Several protagonists behave like real assholes, both within their own organization and towards supporters. Pun Ngai, for example, has deceived and burned out some of her employees (probably not for the first time). And after the left-wing Maoists of Utopia and RedChina had initially supported the campaign with publicity, they then switched back to the state line in early 2019 and lured some Jasic left-wing Maoists into a trap and betrayed them to the police. The “cultural-revolutionary” attempt against the establishment of the CP probably failed for the time being.

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