

On the Political Differences Underlying the HWRS Split

Analysis by DW, July 4, 2012

Since the June 2012 split in HWRS, our organization has been the target of accusations that the split was unprincipled because it was about tactical issues, i.e., about giving critical support to Syriza in the June 2012 Greek elections. In answer to these accusations, we ask comrades to remember that the split was not our choice. We wanted to resolve the differences with CR and DC through serious political discussions. The medium of the pre-Congress discussions that were in progress at the time would have been a perfect way to hammer out the differences and avoid a premature split.

But comrades CR and DC wanted to split without any discussion at all. They ignored the HWRS members's pleas to engage in a substantive political discussion of the issues. Instead, they resorted to bureaucratic maneuvers such as unilaterally declaring DW to be an "outsider," refusing to meet with him, and threatening the members with expulsion if they continued to hold political discussions with him. Eventually, the membership told CR and DC that their high-handedness would not be tolerated any further, stating that "in light of the recent actions of the members of the EC, ... we no longer recognize these individuals as members of HWRS, and will not so recognize them unless and until they agree to engage in a substantive political discussion with the organization, in a good faith effort to resolve the political differences." CR and DC refused this invitation, and since then, have essentially declared themselves to be an external faction of HWRS called HWRS(EC).

Thus, the conclusion that the majority of HWRS split immaturely over tactical differences is unfair. CR and DC deserted the organization before the discussion had begun. What more could the majority have done to stop this premature split from occurring?

If the only difference between the EC and the majority had been about giving critical support to Syriza, this would have been a premature split, because by itself, giving critical support to Social Democracy is only a tactical issue. This remains the case even when giving critical support to a *particular* Social Democratic formation is a right deviation. Yet when examining the political issues underlying the split, one cannot view them in isolation. If the rest of the differences also involve right deviations on the part of the EC, a consistent picture of right deviationism begins to emerge, and the difference on Syriza can then be viewed as part of a political pattern. In this way, the tactical difference is recast as a symptom of underlying principled differences, in which the Greek question is only one link in the chain.

Work in the unions

One of the HWRS majority's principal differences with DC and CR involves how to do work in the unions. Is this an irreconcilable principled difference? The answer is yes. The EC, under the leadership of CR, made fundamental errors on the union question.

The first error was the choice of CR to enter into an opportunistic electoral slate of candidates for union office who opposed the bureaucracy in CR's union, CAPS (California Association of Professional Scientists), without first discussing with the membership the political views of the other slate candidates. CR presented his participation in the slate to HWRS's members as a *fait accompli*. In so doing, CR avoided any discussion regarding whether it is politically principled to run for union office as part of a slate that includes workers who are not anti-capitalist, and support a bourgeois imperialist party such as the Democratic Party. One of the candidates on CR's slate in CAPS publicly announced, in his candidate statement for the union election, that he *supported* anti-union positions taken by Democratic Party politicians. Later, the same person expressed openly anti-communist political views. (For more details, see HWRS' letter to the Liaison Committee dated June 25, 2012.)

How did a member of our organization end up sharing a union slate with an open Democrat and anti-communist? Under CR's leadership, HWRS had lapsed into a Menshevik mode of functioning in which members were allowed to do whatever political work they wanted, without first holding a democratic discussion with the membership. This, by itself, is a sign of an underlying irreconcilable difference of principle. It expresses CR's desire for an organization in which he was not subject to any discipline of the majority. In essence, therefore, it is about the same difference that Lenin had with Mensheviks regarding whether a members are subject to the discipline of the Party (Bolshevism), or can do what they like without caring whether the majority agrees (Menshevism).

The other side of the coin with regard to this undemocratic functioning came to light after the HWRS majority began to criticize the opportunistic aspects of his work in the union. When challenged on his unilateral decisions with regard to his union work, CR reverted to a Stalinist-like effort to impose a top-down, repressive regime on HWRS's internal life. CR's bureaucratic behavior in this regard is dialectically connected to the difference between Bolshevism and Menshevism. As we know, before Lenin's return to Russia in April 1917, the majority in the Bolshevik Party capitulated to Menshevism. Many of these capitulating Bolsheviks later became part of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

Ultimately, then, the dispute is about what kind of party we need to build; it is about the struggle of Lenin for a democratic centralist party. Under true democratic centralism, the members cannot simply do what they like to do—because this is not a the proletarian way but the way of the petty bourgeois—but at the same time, the leadership is accountable to the membership, and cannot unilaterally change the party's substantive political positions without an open, democratic discussion. In the end, therefore, these aspects of the political differences underlying the split reflect CR's deep-seated petty bourgeois and individualist method of functioning—that is, his Menshevism.

Joint caucuses and slates with pro-capitalist workers

Communists cannot build a caucus with workers who, while they support internal union democracy, at the same time support a ruling class party whose politicians carry out anti-union policies. It is a matter of principle not to build such a caucus. Yet CR and DC, his cohort on the EC, stated clearly again and again in their documents on the CAPS work and on Contacts (available on HWRS's website) that it is not only permissible, but important to join and build union caucuses with Democratic Party supporters. The EC apparently believes that it is acceptable for a communist to run for union office on a slate with an avowed anti-communist, based solely on a shared viewpoint in favor of democracy within the union.

Comrades should know what this political method in the unions brings at the end. An example of this is Arnold Miller, who in the 1970s ran as a "democratic and anti bureaucratic" candidate in the UMW (miners' union). It turned out that after being elected, Miller became a typical bureaucrat who betrayed the miners. Miller's betrayals in several rounds of contract negotiations started the decline of a demoralized union.

It is just as much a principle not to run a slate in the unions with supporters of the Democratic Party as it is not to support the Democratic Party in the general elections. There are great differences between public elections in a bourgeois democracy and internal elections in unions, which are workers' organizations. Nonetheless, just as a Democratic Party politician attacks the working class after getting elected with union support, a pro-Democratic Party union member who runs as a "rank-and-file candidate" (such as Miller) transforms into a bureaucrat once in office, and betrays the workers. In both cases, the workers' support for a Democrat reflects their illusions in a party of the capitalist class—illusions that communists should combat, not accommodate.

HWRS has always had a principled difference with the American SWP on this question. The SWP supports pro-capitalist union candidates who promise democratic reforms if elected to union office. The

SWP supported Miller, for example. During the period that led up to the split in HWRS, the EC consisted of two members who cut their political teeth in the SWP. These comrades, CR and DC, apparently have never broken with the SWP's politics regarding work in the unions. They implemented the SWP's politics in connection with CR's work in CAPS. Then, when they got caught, they implemented the other side of the SWP's politics: the ruthless bureaucratic regime of Jack Barnes.

Suing the union in the bosses' courts

Another principled difference on the union question between the former EC members and the HWRS majority was whether it is acceptable to resort to the bosses' courts when challenging undemocratic actions by the union bureaucracy. When communists join with pro-capitalist workers in a union caucus, they are under heavy pressure to make use of the courts in their struggles against the presiding bureaucrats. But appealing to the bosses' courts creates or reinforces the workers' illusions that they can rely on the mechanisms of bourgeois democracy to protect their rights.

These illusions arise because under certain conditions, the courts sometimes take actions that support the struggles of rank-and-file union members. What communists must make clear to the workers, however, is that this will inevitably change when the class struggle intensifies. During critical periods of intense class struggle, the bosses will rely on the courts to bust the unions or to control them through injunctions and similar measures. This is why it is a principled question not to go to the bosses' courts to resolve the internal affairs in the unions.

In CR's case, when CAPS refused to hold membership meetings in violation of its own bylaws, and again after CR and his pro-Democratic supporter were expelled from their union after losing the election, they complained to the California Public Employee Relations Board (PERB). PERB, like the federal NLRB, is an administrative body, not a court, but it plays essentially the same role in the bosses' system for controlling the unions. Thus, it is wrong to ask PERB or similar bodies to resolve disputes within the unions. By doing so, we are encouraging the bosses to intervene in internal union affairs.

CR attempted to justify his actions by arguing that CAPS is not really a true union, because its affairs are managed by a private, profit-making corporation. Nonetheless, CR should not have resorted to the bosses' mechanisms for resolving disputes involving workers' organizations. As we explained above, going to a body like PERB, just like going to a court, promotes the illusion that the bosses' dispute resolution mechanisms have a legitimate role to play in the internal affairs of workers' organizations.

This kind of opportunism is also a workerist deviation. By this we mean that CR capitulated to the backward consciousness of the workers in American unions, and in particular to the consciousness of the relatively privileged workers (the so-called labor aristocracy) who belong to CAPS and its sibling union, PECG (Professional Engineers in California Government), which is managed by the same private corporation. The members of these two unions represent the cream of the labor aristocracy: government-employed scientists and engineers. These workers identify as "professionals," not as members of the working class, and tend to have even more illusions in the system than other workers. When the class struggle ebbs, aristocratic workers' consciousness reflects the infiltration of the ideology of capitalism into the working class. This puts enormous pressure on revolutionaries who work with these workers. In the last analysis, CR capitulated to the backward consciousness of the labor aristocracy. Hence his fundamental error regarding the appropriate method for revolutionary work in the unions.

Other differences: electoral support, gangs, and united front work

We will explain only briefly the rest of the deep-rooted political differences between the HWRS majority and CR that ultimately led to the split. As will be seen, there is a consistent political thread connecting the

previous differences with those that arose during the 2012 pre-Congress discussion. In the end, the split was caused by the trajectory of CR's faction toward right-wing centrism.

HWRS began functioning as an organization in late 2008. Around that time, CR argued unsuccessfully that HWRS should give critical electoral support to the Peace and Freedom Party (PFP). The PFP is a petty-bourgeois party based primarily on white "progressives" in California, most of whom would vote for the Democratic Party, or run for office as Democrats, if the PFP were not an option. The PFP has no support in the working class, and is far from being a workers' party. It amounts to a bloc, primarily electoral in nature, among reformist, social democratic, and right centrist organizations. It exists mostly to give petty-bourgeois "progressives" the option to cast a protest vote against Democratic candidates who are too far right for their taste.

In June 2009, HWRS published an article entitled "The Problem of Critical Support for Bourgeois Workers' Parties (available on the HWRS website), which laid out the HWRS method on that issue. The discussion in that article makes clear that it would be wrong to give the PFP critical support, even if there is some socialist-appearing content in the PFP's program, because the PFP is not based on the working class, and the working class does not have illusions in it. Real workers basically ignore it, and thus there is nothing to expose. CR's position on critical support for PFP was at odds with the HWRS method, as set forth in the article. His later position favoring critical support for Syriza expressed a similar deviation to the right.

The second longstanding difference between CR and the HWRS majority emerged in 2010, during a dispute on how revolutionaries should relate to gangs in the Black communities. CR was a one-comrade minority in this discussion. CR's position was to call for defense guards in the Black community to fight against the gangs. In defense of his position, CR wrote that "Workers self defense guards will find themselves locked in battle to the death with the gangsters and mafia of all continents."

One problem with CR's position is that such a "battle to the death" would do nothing but cause terrible bloodshed in communities that are already suffering deeply from the violence brought on by poverty and oppression. Many more workers and youth would die, and the gangs, which are disciplined and well-armed, would not be weakened. Worse, the police would use the battles between the defense guards and the gangs as an excuse for an increased presence in the communities, leading to an increase police brutality and repression. Thus, CR's position is not just wrong, but basically reactionary. This is why the difference with CR on gangs is an important principled difference.

During the argument with CR on this issue, a comrade from the majority explained HWRS's alternative position this way: "The consciousness of the workers in the oppressed community is decisive if we want to elaborate demands and a program that is a bridge between the present day consciousness and the full revolutionary program. Instead of denouncing all the gangs, we need to create a bridge to the youth and workers in the gangs because we know that when the working class will rise and fight they will join the revolution not the counterrevolution. History shows this clearly."

We know this to be true. When the Rodney King rebellion took place, many members of the Bloods and the Crips, the two leading Black gangs in Los Angeles, abandoned the fight between their gangs and joined the rebellion against police brutality. It is true that the truce between the Bloods and the Crips was in the end only temporary. But in the absence of a revolutionary leadership during the rebellion, the truce could only be temporary. It was the same for the rebellion as a whole: due to the lack of a revolutionary leadership, the community's resistance dissipated, and police brutality returned to the community. But the lesson is still clear: gang members are keenly aware of police repression in their communities, and this consciousness provides an opening to enlist them in the workers' struggle against the state.

The conduct of CR and DC after they deserted HWRS also illuminates the principled differences that led to their departure. Since abandoning HWRS, they have started calling themselves “HWRS(EC)” (a name obviously intended to perpetuate confusion between the two organizations). It is clear to us that HWRS(EC) is a centrist grouplet. In typical centrist fashion, it is already zigzagging between opportunism and a sectarianism, based on the subjectivity of the individuals involved rather than objective reality and the needs of the workers and the oppressed.

Shortly before the split, HWRS became involved in a coalition supporting Denika Chatman, the mother of Kenneth Harding Jr., a young Black man killed by San Francisco police in 2011 for not paying his fare on Muni, San Francisco’s public transit. Ms. Chatman is trying to build a workers’ action against Muni to commemorate the anniversary of her son’s death and raise public consciousness about police killings. The coalition working with her, in which HWRS and CR are both still participating, is called the Ad Hoc Committee For a MUNI Shut Down on July 16 (AHC).

At a post-split meeting of the AHC to plan the action that will take place in San Francisco on July 16, CR demanded that the coalition adopt his entire two-sided flyer containing a laundry list of demands, including ones related to university students, budget cuts, and other areas not related directly to the action at hand. CR’s proposed flyer may have been a good piece of anti-capitalist propaganda, but his request that it be accepted in its entirety, including its long laundry list of demands, was the method of a subjective sectarian who does not take into account the present consciousness of the workers.

What appears to have motivated CR to adopt this tactic was the subjectivity of the centrist who is more concerned with proving that his opponent is wrong than with employing the objectively correct tactics for a given situation. By promoting his laundry list flyer, CR sought to “expose” his opponent (HWRS) as “opportunist” based on HWRS’s advocacy of a more limited set of demands. But the purpose of the AHC is to build a united front action by Muni workers and the black community against police brutality. Such a united front action does not need to, and should not, adopt most of the Transitional Program. Rather, it needs to focus on concrete proposals such as the need to build Labor, Black and Brown defense guards against the cops, and on the link between that and the need to build for an indefinite political general strike movement. Developing such a united front is by itself a revolutionary achievement. Demanding the arming of the unions and the oppressed communities against the police can only challenge the entire capitalist system, and raises the question who is in control of the state.

Insisting on a laundry list of demands when attempting to start such a united front is sectarian. All the people at the meeting, including Ms. Chatman, rejected CR’s draft flyer with its laundry list of demands. Instead, the meeting accepted HWRS’s points of unity for this specific action, and adopted a flyer with this language: “Organize Working Class, Black and Brown Defense Guards Against Police Brutality; Labor, Black and Brown—Drive the Cops Out of Town; Down with ‘Stop and Frisk’; Down with Union-Busting Prop. G; Free MUNI For All Youth; Build a Movement for an Indefinite General Strike, Against the Attacks on the Unions and the Brown and Black Communities.”

These are concrete demands for a specific action based on the need to create a bridge between the present consciousness of the masses (and in particular the consciousness of the oppressed communities and the labor movement) and the need to overthrow capitalism. This is how the transitional program’s method is implemented under concrete conditions. Against this revolutionary program and method, CR presented the abstract sectarian method of trying to impose a laundry list program on a united front built around a specific action.

Conclusion

In this document, we have showed how the differences between CR and DC and the HWRS majority are about principles not just tactics. But even more importantly, we have explained how the different

elements of CR and DC's differences with the HWRS majority, when taken as a whole, add up to paint a picture of political centrism. By centrism, we mean that CR and DC oscillate between reformism and revolutionary Marxism, and correspondingly zigzag between opportunism and sectarianism.

The conduct of CR and DC presents an example of how centrists abandon principles of revolutionary Marxists under the alien pressure of the ruling class. This pressure resulted in the compromises typical of centrism. The centrist method, which we counterpose to the Marxist method, is the method of the petty bourgeois who occupy the middle social ground between the proletariat and the capitalists, and, correspondingly, the middle political ground between revolutionary Marxism and reformism. This fundamental difference of method exemplifies the principled differences that separate HWRS from its ex-comrades, CR and DC.