

ON THE POSSIBILITY OF REVOLUTION*

Letter From a Reader...and Response

Revolution recently received the following correspondence from a reader.

Dear *Revolution*,

I read with great interest the special issue of your paper, "The Crossroads We Face, The Leadership We Need" (*Revolution* #84, April 8, 2007). I found it very refreshing and thought-provoking, especially the fact that the question of revolution, the nature of the revolution, and the necessary leadership for that revolution were seriously discussed in a way that is very rare these days. One part in particular stood out to me, and it is this that I am writing about—the section dealing with "Hard Questions" relating to revolution. More specifically, I am referring to where it addresses the fact that "Conventional wisdom says that revolution is impossible in a country like the U.S.," and then it goes on to say:

"There is no sense in denying that it can certainly seem that way. But if revolution is necessary—and it is—then you have to figure out, no matter the seeming odds, how it could come about." (p. 2)

But then, in this special issue, this question of "how it could come about" is not spoken to further, beyond stressing the crucial principle that "Such a revolution—to be a real revolution—must be the conscious and determined act of millions"; and that "It can only be undertaken when the system is in deep crisis and masses are convinced there is no other way." (p. 2)

I realize that the purpose of this special issue was not to get into this question in depth; and in unity with the orientation stressed in that special issue, that this is a question that has to be approached very seriously, I have looked into other writings and talks where your

thinking on this question is addressed. On this basis, I believe an accurate summary of the basic position you have put forward, on how revolution could be made in a country like the U.S., would be the following:

In broad terms, there are two different types of countries in the world—a small number of imperialist countries, such as the U.S., and a large number of oppressed countries in the Third World—and there are two corresponding roads for revolution:

Protracted people's war in the Third World countries, in which warfare is the main form of struggle more or less from the beginning and throughout the revolutionary process, and in which this warfare, on the revolutionary side, starts out on a small scale and gradually accumulates forces, building up its strength centered in the rural areas, increasingly surrounding the stronghold of power of the old system, in the cities, and then, when the necessary conditions have been brought into being, fighting the final battles, centered in the urban areas, to fully defeat the old regime; and

What has been called the "October Road," in imperialist countries. (This, as I understand it, is based on the fact that the first successful revolution that led to a lasting socialist state took place in October, 1917, in Russia, with the leadership of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, and gave rise to the Soviet Union.) This "October Road" model involves a relatively long period of political (essentially non-military) struggle, in which the aim is to, as Lenin put it, prepare minds and organize forces for revolution; and only when there has been a major, qualitative change in the objective situation, such that all of society is gripped in a deep-going crisis and large numbers of people have come to the point of being ready to fight and die for radical change—only

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then could an armed struggle be launched on a correct basis and with any prospect of winning. Further, when this armed struggle would be launched, under those revolutionary circumstances, it would take the form of, first, mass insurrections, occurring at the same time, in a number of major urban areas, with the emerging revolutionary forces seizing and remaining on the offensive with the objective of quickly defeating the forces of the old order and establishing a new, revolutionary regime over as much territory as possible. Then, faced with the very likely prospect that the overthrown ruling class, and other reactionary forces, would regroup and unleash an armed onslaught against the new revolutionary regime, that regime would have to wage a further war, a civil war, to finally and fully defeat those overthrown and reactionary forces.

From what I have seen, in this model for revolution that has been theorized in regard to imperialist countries, the actual struggle for the seizure of power—which would follow a whole period characterized by ideological, political, and organizational work—has been described with the formulation ai/cw (or armed insurrection, followed by civil war).

I strongly agree with the emphasis given in this model to the fact that, for any real revolution to succeed in an imperialist country, and especially a major imperialist power, there would need to be a revolutionary situation—not just problems, or even just serious problems, for the ruling class but a profound crisis, affecting all of society, reaching into all of the ruling institutions, including the machinery of repression of the ruling class, and leading to militant resistance on the part of large numbers of people on the bottom of society and in other strata as well. It would very definitely be wrong and even suicidal to try to wage a revolutionary struggle for power, or even to initiate some kind of lower-level military actions, in the absence of those conditions.

But the problem I see is that, even with those conditions, this ai/cw model doesn't seem realistic. In particular, it doesn't seem likely at all that urban insurrections, even if they involved huge numbers of people and occurred simultaneously in a number of cities, could succeed in going up against even a relatively small part of the military forces of the old order, which would almost certainly remain very powerful, well organized, trained, and equipped. By their very nature, the revolutionary insurrections would need to defeat and disintegrate those powerful forces of the old order in a very short period of time, which would require entering into decisive, large-scale engagements more or less from the beginning. Yet by definition the revolutionary forces would, in effect, be trying to do this "from a standing start" and without any time and experience to build up

the kind of forces that would have any chance of winning such engagements. And what is more, even if somehow the revolutionary forces could succeed in these initial insurrections, it would seem that any regime that they would establish would be highly vulnerable to the massed power of the remaining, and regrouped, forces of reactionary violence. Under these circumstances, how would it be possible to maintain the new revolutionary regime, defend its territory, and provide for the needs of its people as well as the requirements of the newly formed defense forces of the revolutionary state? Once again, it would seem very unlikely that it would be possible to do this, and that instead this new revolutionary regime would be defeated and its forces pulverized in very short order.

These, it seems to me, are very real problems, in terms of what I understand to be the "October Road" model for revolution in imperialist countries. I am raising this in line with, and in appreciation of, the fact that indeed revolution is a very serious matter and must be approached very seriously—in the same spirit in which the special issue of *Revolution* (#84, April 8, 2007) argues that "if revolution is necessary—and it is—then you have to figure out, no matter the seeming odds, how it could come about." So the question remains: even in the best of circumstances, in a powerful imperialist country like the U.S., would revolution really be possible—and, if so, how?

RESPONSE

The questions raised in this letter are obviously extremely important. The kinds of problems it points to are things that would, in fact, pose themselves very prominently at the time when a revolutionary struggle for the seizure of power were being waged in an imperialist country. They are problems that do touch on the fundamental question of whether the kind of revolutionary struggle spoken about in this letter could really succeed. They are problems that highlight the need for strategic conception—or in some important aspects reconception—as part of developing the basic orientation that, in the realm of theory and strategic approach, could illuminate the road to a successful revolution.

In a talk last year, "Bringing Forward Another Way" (which has just been run as a series in *Revolution* and is posted, in its entirety, online at revcom.us), Bob Avakian calls attention to the fact that there are "two things we don't know how to do—namely, meeting repression and actually winning when the time comes. Now the point of saying these are two things we don't know how to do...is to call attention to the fact that we'd better work on these things—in the appropriate way and not in inappropriate ways."

He goes on to say, with regard to the question of winning when the time comes:

“We have to take up the question and approach the question of winning in a very serious and not in an infantile way, and not in a way which makes it even easier for this kind of concentrated power of reaction [embodied in the imperialist ruling class] to crush any attempt to bring a new world into being.”

To give further emphasis to this orientation, Avakian then includes in “Bringing Forward Another Way” a statement which was published in *Revolution*, “Some Crucial Points of Revolutionary Orientation—in Opposition to Infantile Posturing and Distortions of Revolution.” This statement begins:

“Revolution is a very serious matter and must be approached in a serious and scientific way, and not through subjective and individualistic expressions of frustration, posturing and acts which run counter to the development of a mass revolutionary movement which is aimed at—and which must be characterized by means that are fundamentally consistent with and serve to bring into being—a radically different and far better world. Revolution, and in particular communist revolution, is and can only be the act of masses of people, organized and led to carry out increasingly conscious struggle to abolish, and advance humanity beyond, all systems and relations of exploitation and oppression.” (“Some Crucial Points” is reproduced in this issue of *Revolution*.)

In line with this orientation, in “Bringing Forward Another Way,” proceeding on the basis of what is said in “Some Crucial Points,” Avakian calls for study, and wrangling in the realm of theory and conception, in regard to the problem of winning when the time comes. As he puts it:

“Now, in previous talks I’ve spoken about two tracks in relation to winning, in relation to the seizure of power when there is the emergence of a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary people of millions. In light of what I’ve just read (which was the whole of ‘Some Crucial Points of Revolutionary Orientation—in Opposition to Infantile Posturing and Distortions of Revolution’), and with that as a template, if you will, or a foundation—and from a strategic, not immediate, standpoint—we should understand the role and the dialectical relation of these two tracks. These are separate tracks, and only with a qualitative change in the situation (as spoken to in what I just read from ‘Some Crucial Points’) can

there be a merging of the two tracks. Until that point, they can only correctly be developed, and have to be developed, separately.

“The first track, which is the main focus and content of things now, is political, ideological, and organizational work, guided by the strategic orientation of united front under the leadership of the proletariat, having in view and politically preparing for the emergence of a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary people on a mass scale. This is what it means to ‘hasten while awaiting’ the development of a revolutionary situation.

“The second track refers to and is in essence developing the theory and strategic orientation to be able to deal with the situation and be able to win when the two tracks can and should be merged—with a qualitative change in the objective political terrain, with the emergence of a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary people (as I have spoken to that here and as is set forth in a concentrated way in ‘Some Crucial Points’). What is appropriate now in this regard is attention to the realm of theory and strategic thinking and understanding, learning in a deep and all-sided way from experience of different kinds. There is a need to study all these different kinds of experience and for it to be synthesized from a correct strategic perspective—all in order to accumulate knowledge to deepen theoretical understanding and strategic conception.”

And, elaborating on a point made by Mao Tsetung, Avakian has emphasized the fundamental orientation that it is extremely important not to be bound by superstition and convention—and by what has, up to this point, been held to be true—but instead to approach all problems with critical and creative thinking, grounded in scientific principles and methods.

Upholding Some Basic Principles

In this light, the following are some essential points of orientation that have been underscored by further study and theoretical conceptualization.

* The analysis of, and the distinction between, the two types of countries and the two corresponding strategic approaches (roads) to revolution, which are referred to in this letter from a reader, remain essentially valid and important. At the same time, major changes in the world, and in Third World countries in particular—including especially the massive and continuing migration of (former) peasants from the rural areas to the urban areas, and the swelling of urban shantytown slums, in many of these countries—indicate the need

for further theoretical work to gain a deeper understanding of these important developments, the larger process and dynamics they are part of, and the implications of this for the revolutionary struggle, even where, in Third World countries, the basic strategic conception and approach (road) would remain fundamentally the same—that is, protracted people’s war, to surround the cities from the countryside and then finally to defeat the power of the reactionary ruling classes, centered in the cities.

* With regard to the imperialist countries (and the questions raised in this letter from a reader focus on this type of country) it remains true, and a decisive point of orientation, that in order for there to be the basis to wage a serious struggle for revolutionary power, and the possibility of winning such a struggle, there must be a major, qualitative change in the objective situation, including in the political sentiments, mood, and actions of masses of people. As it is put in “Some Crucial Points of Revolutionary Orientation—in Opposition to Infantile Posturing and Distortions of Revolution”:

“The whole system we now live under is based on exploitation—here and all over the world. It is completely worthless and no basic change for the better can come about until this system is overthrown....

“In a country like the U.S., the revolutionary overthrow of this system can only be achieved once there is a major, qualitative change in the nature of the objective situation, such that society as a whole is in the grip of a profound crisis, owing fundamentally to the nature and workings of the system itself, and along with that there is the emergence of a revolutionary people, numbering in the millions and millions, conscious of the need for revolutionary change and determined to fight for it. In this struggle for revolutionary change, the revolutionary people and those who lead them will be confronted by the violent repressive force of the machinery of the state which embodies and enforces the existing system of exploitation and oppression; and in order for the revolutionary struggle to succeed, it will need to meet and defeat that violent repressive force of the old, exploitative and oppressive order.

“Before the development of a revolutionary situation—and as the key to working toward the development of a revolutionary people, in a country like the U.S.—those who see the need for and wish to contribute to a revolution must focus their efforts on raising the political and ideological consciousness of masses of people and building mas-

sive political resistance to the main ways in which, at any given time, the exploitative and oppressive nature of this system is concentrated in the policies and actions of the ruling class and its institutions and agencies—striving through all this to enable growing numbers of people to grasp both the need and the possibility for revolution when the necessary conditions have been brought into being, as a result of the unfolding of the contradictions of the system itself as well as the political, and ideological, work of revolutionaries.”

New and Important Conclusions

At the same time, study and theoretical conceptualization has also pointed in some new and important directions:

* Even with a revolutionary situation and the emergence of a revolutionary people, problems of the kind that this letter raises, and emphasizes, could almost certainly not be solved by the strategy of simultaneous urban insurrections, leading quickly to the establishment of a revolutionary regime and then, very likely, the waging of a civil war to finally defeat the remaining forces of the overthrown ruling class and other reactionary forces. A different strategic approach would almost certainly be required, once the necessary conditions had come into being, as embodied in a revolutionary crisis in society and the emergence of a revolutionary people (once again, see “Some Crucial Points”).

One possible exception to this conclusion would be the development of a situation along lines that were essentially the same as what happened in the original “October Revolution” in Russia. In that situation, the basic factors that led to the successful insurrection included:

the reality that Russia, while an imperialist power with an extensive empire, was at the same time a very backward country, with much lower levels of industrial development than other imperialist countries and with widespread feudal relations still remaining, especially in the vast countryside, where the majority of society still lived, and greatly suffered;

conditions of intense exploitation and immiseration of the great majority of people in that country, along with the highly repressive nature of the ruling autocratic regime (headed by an absolute monarch, the Tsar);

in addition, the heightening of all this, and the even more extreme misery and desperation of the masses of people, as a result of the involvement of Russia for several years in the first world war, and the terrible toll this exacted on the people in Russia and the rank and

file of the Russian army;

the fact that the Tsarist regime was toppled as a result of mass upheaval, as well as bourgeois and imperialist intrigue, in the first part of 1917 (the February revolution) and that the new bourgeois government that came to power as a result of this February revolution would not, and in essence could not, pull out of the war, even though there was great and continually rising discontent with the war and a growing mass demand to get Russia out of it.

In these circumstances, on the basis of having strengthened their ties and roots among the exploited workers (proletarians) in the major urban areas in Russia—and with the new bourgeois regime increasingly vulnerable (for reasons pointed to here) and sections of its army coming over to the revolutionary side—Lenin and the Bolsheviks (Russian communists) were able to lead mass insurrections which, rather quickly and with a relatively minor amount of actual warfare, overthrew the bourgeois government and established in its place a proletarian state (Soviet rule). While this was a real revolution, involving masses in an insurrectionary rising—and it was not merely a coup pulled off by a small number of conspirators—in the circumstances that obtained in Russia at that time (briefly summarized here, in some essential aspects) the bourgeois government, resting on a weak and increasingly rotting foundation, was essentially unable to muster any significant force to suppress the insurrectionary rising at its beginning, and the old regime fell relatively easily and quickly.

In sum, it was a very rare combination of circumstances that led to the success of this October Revolution, in the form of mass, and more or less simultaneous, urban insurrections.

Of course, if a revolutionary people and their leadership were to find themselves in a situation very similar to that which existed in Russia in 1917, then it would seem foolish, and indeed criminal, for them to fail to seize on such a situation to knock over the rotting old order quickly and establish a new revolutionary power, quite possibly through mass urban insurrections, as happened in Russia. But it is important to keep in mind that it would be extremely unlikely for circumstances very similar to that to emerge again in an imperialist country, and particularly a highly developed and powerful imperialist country. It is also important to keep in mind that, although these events in October 1917 in Russia led to the quick victory of the socialist revolution, in its very initial stage, the new revolutionary regime then had to fight a several years' civil war, against regrouped reactionary forces, including officers and troops from the old, reactionary army, which had support from a number of imperialist countries, some of which actually invaded the territory of the new

Soviet republic in the course of this civil war.

So, in short, all this points to the conclusion that, in the future, revolutions in imperialist countries would very, very likely not be able to succeed, once the struggle for power became the order of the day, by attempting to follow the course taken in the insurrectionary uprisings of the October Revolution in Russia.

* With regard, then, to the "October Road" as a whole, there are some essential aspects that do still apply, while there are other important aspects that almost certainly would not, and could not, be applied to successfully wage the struggle for power.

What continues to apply, in basic terms, is that the road of revolution in imperialist countries requires a whole period of political, ideological, and organizational work to prepare for the eventual emergence of a profound revolutionary crisis and the emergence of a revolutionary people (preparing minds and organizing forces for revolution, as Lenin put it).

No one can predict, in advance, exactly how long such a period would last (and, of course, that would vary from country to country). But, as emphasized in "Bringing Forward Another Way" (and elsewhere), the role of revolutionaries is not simply to wait, passively, for a revolutionary situation to somehow magically arise, but to "hasten while awaiting" the development of this situation, to carry out all-around ideological and political work to repolarize society, as much as possible, in a direction that, from a strategic standpoint, is more favorable to revolution and to prepare growing ranks of the people, at the base of society and among other strata, as well as preparing the vanguard party itself, for the emergence of a revolutionary situation.

At the same time, such a revolutionary situation is not something that can simply be "called into existence" through the will, or even through the efforts, of the revolutionaries alone. As "Some Crucial Points" makes clear, this comes about "as a result of the unfolding of the contradictions of the system itself as well as the political, and ideological, work of revolutionaries." On the one hand, and very importantly, it would be wrong, and actually work against revolution, to have, and to impose on reality, some stereotyped "formula" for how a revolutionary situation develops, and what it looks like as it emerges. On the other hand, it is a fact that such a revolutionary situation will be marked by certain very definite features and characteristics which are not simply the subjective impressions of the revolutionary vanguard, but are the objective expressions of the profound intensification of contradictions in society, and in the world as a whole.

This relates to the fact that, in basic terms, the criteria that were formulated by Lenin, at the time of the Rus-

sian Revolution, for what characterizes a revolutionary situation and what are the necessary and essential conditions for waging the struggle for the seizure of power in countries like Russia (that is, generally speaking, imperialist countries) also remain valid and would still apply. Lenin said that in a revolutionary situation:

the ruling class is enmeshed in a profound crisis, which among other things is marked by acute conflicts within the ranks of the ruling class itself, so that it is increasingly unable to rule in the old way;

these cracks and fissures within the ruling class provide further openings for the suppressed anger of the masses of people to burst through and, for this as well as other reasons, the masses are unwilling to live in the old way, but are determined to bring about a radical change in society;

and, along with this, there is a revolutionary party which is continually developing extensive influence and broad and deep ties among growing numbers of the exploited and oppressed in society, and among all strata in society, so that it is capable of giving more conscious expression, as well as organized form and direction, to the determination of truly massive numbers of people to bring about such a radical change.

Speaking about imperialist countries, Lenin also identified three basic conditions that were necessary for a successful struggle for power:

1) This struggle, and in particular one that embodies communist objectives, depends not on the actions of a vanguard party alone but on an advanced class, representing the basis and potential for remaking society in a way that resolves society's fundamental contradictions in the interests of the exploited and oppressed, and ultimately in the interests of the great majority of the people. In today's world, that advanced class is the proletariat. As a class, the proletariat represents the collective means through which the basic economic life and functioning of society is carried out; and it embodies the potential to take hold of the means of production—the technology, the land and raw materials, and so on—which are themselves the product of collective labor, and to transform them step by step into the collective resource of society. (Land and raw materials as such are “provided by nature,” but to become part of the process of producing wealth, in one form or another, they must be integrated into some system of human production and social relations and be worked on by human beings—cultivated, mined, etc.—and they are transformed in this way and through the process of production overall. In capitalist society, above all, this is done through fundamentally collective labor.) And, along with this, the interests of the proletariat, as a class, lie in transforming and revolutioniz-

ing all the economic and social relations, the political structures and institutions, and the ways of thinking which correspond, under capitalism, to the private appropriation of socially-produced wealth and the division of society into exploiters and exploited. Lenin also analyzed how, with the development of capitalism into a world-wide system of imperialism—and with imperialism's extreme exploitation and plunder of the Third World—there is a section of the working class in the imperialist countries that is, to no small extent, bribed from the spoils of imperialism, and it is necessary for revolution in the imperialist countries to rely on what Lenin referred to as the “lower and deeper” sections of the proletariat, whose conditions of life correspond to that of a class which has nothing to lose but its chains of exploitation and oppression. It is the role of the communist vanguard party of the proletariat to enable these proletarians, and people from other strata who are seeking a radical change in society, to become conscious of the revolutionary interests of the proletariat as a class and the role of especially its “lower and deeper” sections as the bedrock on which the communist revolution rests.

2) The revolutionary struggle for power must rely on a revolutionary people—masses of people, coming forward not only from among the proletariat but also from other sections of oppressed people and broad strata of society, who are (in the words of “Some Crucial Points”) conscious of the need for revolutionary change and determined to fight for it.

3) This revolutionary struggle for power must be launched in conditions where not only is the ruling class unable to rule in the old way, and the masses of people unwilling to live in the old way, but also the forces and programs representing weak, vacillating, and half-hearted opposition to the old order have increasingly been shown to be incapable of meeting the needs of the situation and the demands of the politically aroused and revolutionary-minded masses, in their millions.

The fulfillment of these three conditions, Lenin emphasized, represent a basic dividing line between, on the one hand, a genuine revolutionary struggle for power, on the part of masses of people, led by a communist vanguard, and, on the other hand, various forms of what today is generally called “terrorism.” And in an overall sense Lenin's characterization of the conditions and criteria for a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary struggle for power not only remain valid but continue to have decisive importance, particularly as applied to imperialist countries, not only in distinguishing genuine revolution from “terrorism,” but also in establishing the basic foundation for recognizing, and being able to successfully seize on, a revo-

lutionary opportunity, when it appears.

On the other hand, even with a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary people—even in circumstances where the basic criteria and conditions spoken to by Lenin (as summarized just above) would apply—what would be required, on the part of the revolutionaries in an imperialist country, in order to have a chance of winning, would be to wage a more protracted struggle than the kind of mass insurrections that Lenin himself led in Russia in 1917. It would require a struggle that would very likely not involve decades but would very likely involve years—and one in which it would almost certainly be necessary for the organized forces of the revolution to avoid confronting not only the full power of the reactionary forces and their organized machinery of violence but also to avoid, for some time, direct and more conventional encounters with anything like major, well organized and still powerful formations of this reactionary force as well.

This marks a basic and very important difference from the October, 1917 revolution in Russia and from that aspect of the “October Road.”

* Along with this, it would most likely be the case that, in the early stages of this protracted struggle, and for some time, the revolutionary forces would not be setting up a formal regime (which, if it existed, would have to fulfill the objectives spoken to in the letter from a reader, such as defending and administering a defined territory on an ongoing basis). In fact, establishing such a revolutionary state would be the goal of this protracted struggle, and would become possible at the time of, or with the more or less immediate approach of, the final and complete defeat of the reactionary forces and the final and complete victory of the revolution.

During this more protracted revolutionary struggle, the organized core forces of the revolution would be “intertwined among,” and in a fundamental sense sheltered and protected by, the larger revolutionary people—the tens and tens of millions who were won to support the revolution in various ways even while, at any given point, many of them might not be part of the main organized forces of the revolutionary struggle. In this way, the core revolutionary forces would, as Mao Tsetung put it, be like fish swimming in the sea made up of the masses of revolutionary people.

Here, there is something important to learn from an insight of an imperialist strategist, British General Rupert Smith, author of the book *The Utility of Force*. As is common among those with the outlook of the imperialists, Smith mixes up what would be genuine revolutionary forces with various “terrorist” groups, but nonetheless this observation by Smith is highly rele-

vant and pregnant with meaning in relation to a genuine revolutionary struggle for power, in conditions where such a struggle could be waged on a correct foundation: an insurrectionary force that is “defining the parameters of the conflict” (Smith writes) has “by default presented an alternative force and power.” (Smith, *The Utility of Force*, p. 385)

* Previously, the kind of strategic conception spoken to here, in terms of protracted revolutionary struggle, was discounted because it was believed it was not possible to engage in and sustain such a protracted struggle, in technologically highly developed and highly urbanized imperialist countries, even when there was a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary people. So, it is important to further examine various key factors relating to this.

It is very clear that, in such technologically developed imperialist countries, attempting such a struggle—or any kind of warfare—without and before the emergence of a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary people would lead to a terrible defeat for the revolution and the demoralization of the masses of people who yearn for a radically different and better world. It is one thing—it is something that anyone with a sense of justice would uphold—when masses of people defend themselves against outrageous acts of oppression and violent suppression. But it is quite another thing—it is wrong and very harmful—to attempt to wage an actual armed struggle, including offensive actions, in the form of “urban guerrilla warfare,” or according to some other conception of warfare, in conditions where there is not yet a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary people—once again, this is bound to lead to defeat for those attempting to implement such a “strategy” and to make it more difficult to build a revolutionary movement in a way that could eventually lead to winning when the time came.

Why would such attempts be bound to fail, and lead to disaster? Among the essential reasons for this are:

In the absence of a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary people—in the absence of the basic conditions and criteria summarized above, drawing from Lenin, in terms of a struggle for power in an imperialist country—attempts to wage a revolutionary war of some kind in an imperialist country could not rely on the masses of oppressed and exploited people. It could not set in motion a dynamic where more and more of the masses, from various strata in society, could and would be motivated and mobilized not only to support but to become actively involved in such a struggle. Instead, the dynamic would be one where the forces attempting such a struggle would be more and more isolated from the masses, forced into a passive position, exposed to the concentrated power of the repressive

state—and defeated, probably rather quickly and definitely in decisive terms.

Particularly in imperialist countries where the most exploited and oppressed masses of people represent a significant section of society but still not a majority; and where there are large middle strata whose conditions are, “in normal times,” not marked by the kind of desperation and outrage that characterize the lives of those on the bottom of society; in such circumstances, attempting to launch a revolutionary struggle for power when there is not yet an acute revolutionary crisis in society, and the right as well as the ability of the ruling class to rule have not yet been called fundamentally into question among very large sections of the population, of many different strata—this would lead, in those conditions, to a situation in which the ruling class would be able to further polarize society in a way more favorable to it, while the revolutionary forces would, at best, find support among sections of society that would, in effect, be encircled and suppressed—and, even among those sections of the people, the revolutionary struggle would lose support, as those masses suffered increasingly terrible repression and destructive violence, directed at them by the ruling class, while the revolutionary struggle would increasingly be losing momentum and initiative and the revolutionary forces would be increasingly confined, fixed, and pulverized.

In an imperialist country, only with the development of an acute revolutionary crisis, profoundly affecting all of society, and with the emergence of a revolutionary people—a force of people conscious of the need for revolutionary change and determined to fight for it, a force numbering in the millions, with its bedrock among the most exploited and oppressed, but drawing from all strata of the people—only in those conditions could there be the possibility of achieving, through the waging of a protracted struggle for power, a dynamic that would overall favor the revolutionary side and a polarization in society as a whole that would also be increasingly favorable for the revolution.

It is for these reasons that “Some Crucial Points” emphasizes that, in a country like the U.S.:

“In the absence of a revolutionary situation—and in opposition to the revolutionary orientation and revolutionary political and ideological work that is actually needed—the initiation of, or the advocacy of, isolated acts of violence, by individuals or small groups, divorced from masses of people and attempting to substitute for a revolutionary movement of masses of people, is very wrong and extremely harmful. Even—or especially—if this is done in the name of ‘revolution,’ it will work against, and in fact

do serious damage to, the development of an actual revolutionary movement of masses of people, as well as to the building of political resistance against the outrages and injustices of this system even before there is a revolutionary situation. It will aid the extremely repressive forces of the existing system in their moves to isolate, attack and crush those, both revolutionary forces and broader forces of political opposition, who are working to build mass political resistance and to achieve significant, and even profound, social change through the politically-conscious activity and initiative of masses of people.”

The re-examination of things with new theoretical perspectives and insights has further confirmed the fact that it would lead to defeat and disaster to attempt the kind of protracted struggle spoken about here, before there is the emergence of a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary people. But, on the other hand, it has pointed to the conclusion that with such a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary people, it would very likely be necessary, and could be possible, to wage such a protracted struggle—and in fact this would almost certainly be the only means through which it would be possible for the revolutionary people to actually win.

* A particular and distinguishing feature of the situation in which it would be possible, and correct, for the revolutionary forces to launch such a protracted struggle, would be that the repressive and reactionary violence of the existing state and its institutions would have lost its legitimacy—would have come to be seen as unjust and illegitimate violence—in the eyes of very broad sections of society. This is one of the key indicators of a revolutionary situation and key bases for the emergence of a revolutionary people. The response of the revolutionary forces to this reactionary repressive violence in this situation—at the start of the protracted revolutionary struggle—would be of such a nature and would have particular features that would make clear that a different authority—revolutionary authority, which would be recognized, by large and growing numbers of people, as legitimate and as having right on its side—was now contending in a serious and strategically all-out way against the old, reactionary authority; and that, while not presenting itself to the reactionary forces in such a way that would make it possible for them to pulverize and destroy it, this revolutionary authority was fighting with the strategic aim of establishing a new form of political power in society that would open the door to creating new economic, social, and political relations—relations free of exploitation and oppression.

The fact that the strategic aims of such communist-led revolutionary forces—the goal of finally putting an end to all exploitative and oppressive relations—would find expression in the doctrine and principles, the methods and means of fighting of these revolutionary forces, including the active and increasingly unleashed role of women in the fight and at all levels of the organized revolutionary forces—this would, over the course of this protracted struggle, more and more shine a light on the fundamental difference between such revolutionary forces and the various reactionaries who would oppose and seek to crush the revolution.

* In this overall approach, while the old ruling class and the forces of the old order would seek to terrorize the people away from supporting the revolution and would try to isolate and crush the core organized forces of the revolution, those revolutionary forces would once again be like fish in the sea, amidst the vast and growing ranks of the revolutionary people. The brutish actions and wanton destruction carried out by the imperialists, and by reactionaries allied with them, would serve, through the course of the struggle, to expose more deeply their true nature and to propel greater masses of people to the revolutionary cause, especially as the revolutionaries were able to conduct their operations in such a way as to (invoking once again the phrase of Rupert Smith) “define the parameters” of the conflict and frustrate the attempts of the imperialists and reactionaries to draw the revolutionary forces into situations where they could be pulverized and destroyed.

To borrow another formulation from Rupert Smith, this would involve the revolutionary forces acting in such a way as to remain, at least for most of this protracted struggle, “below the threshold of the utility of force” of the imperialists. Smith points out that in warfare, of whatever kind, it is not the force of the contending sides, in absolute terms, that matters but rather the force each side is actually able to utilize to its advantage in its contest with its adversary—this is what Smith means in speaking of “utility of force.” (For example, one side in a conflict may have nuclear weapons, but if it is not able to use them in that conflict, then those weapons do not have utility of force.) It is not that the imperialists would hold back from bringing down terrible destructive force against the revolutionaries and the masses of people who supported them—given their reactionary nature, it would be necessary to reckon with the fact that the imperialists would do this—but the decisive question would be whether, through doing this, the imperialists would be able to isolate and destroy the organized forces of the revolution; or whether, on the contrary, these barbaric actions of the imperialists would deepen the hatred of growing

numbers of people for the imperialists, stiffen the resolve of those already supporting the revolutionary side, and win more of the people to sympathize with, and to actively support, the revolutionary cause.

It must also be anticipated that, as a crucial element in their strategic approach, the imperialists would seek to target and eliminate those they identified as the leadership of the revolution, in accordance with the “decapitation” doctrine generally applied by imperialist and reactionary forces. Faced with this, the revolutionary side would need to correctly and skillfully combine centralization, ideologically and in terms of strategic approach, with a great deal of decentralization, organizationally and tactically, and initiative on the local and basic levels. And it would be necessary to combine a determined struggle to defend and protect leadership, and defeat attempts at “decapitation,” with a doctrinal orientation and practical efforts to continually develop, train, and give initiative to new leaders. In all this, on the revolutionary side, there would be an important application of the principle of “solid core, with a lot of elasticity.”

Smith’s characterization of insurgent forces that fight “below the threshold of the utility of force” of their adversary, represents a reformulation, from the standpoint of the imperialists, of some basic principles of warfare developed by Mao Tsetung during the course of the protracted people’s wars in China—and in particular the principle, which Mao stressed, that the revolutionary forces must avoid strategic encounters, which would have a decisive bearing on the outcome of the war as a whole, until such time as these encounters can be waged to the advantage of the revolutionary forces, and can hasten their final victory. This is a basic principle that revolutionary forces would need to keep clearly in mind and correctly apply to the particular circumstances; it is something they could ignore only at great cost to the revolutionary cause.

* The main objectives of the revolutionaries, in waging the kind of protracted struggle spoken of here, in the conditions which would make such a struggle possible, would be: to win over even greater numbers of people, through the confrontation and the living contrast between the two radically different authorities, while at the same time frustrating, disintegrating and demoralizing the imperialist and reactionary forces—which would be seeking to violently re-impose and reinforce the old order and the old relations of exploitation, oppression, and domination—and then finally to defeat those reactionary forces. In the course of this, the revolutionary forces would conduct a determined and strategically conceived course of action, marked by calibrated struggles against the reactionary forces, in

which the revolutionaries would strive to gain more and more initiative without prematurely entering into encounters that posed the strategic risk of decisive defeat and decimation. And, with regard to those who made up the ranks of the reactionary forces, especially those who were actually drawn from the oppressed and exploited in society, and whose objective interests would fundamentally lie with the revolution, the revolutionaries would continue to make political appeals to them to come over to the side of the revolution.

* Finally, when the necessary conditions had been created through this whole intense but also protracted struggle, the revolutionary forces would then be faced with the challenge, and the prospect, of finally defeating the remaining violent forces of imperialism and counter-revolution. But even at that point, the revolutionary forces would very likely need to avoid confronting particularly “hard core” reactionary elements too early on, especially in situations and on terms that would still be favorable to them, such as the type of engagements between massed forces that has been common in wars between technology-heavy armed forces (for example, in the two world wars in the 20th century) or the kind of very one-sided battles the U.S. conducted against the regular forces of Saddam Hussein’s regime in the wars in Iraq, in 1991 and again in 2003. Instead, even during the final stage, and particularly at the early points in this stage, the revolutionary forces might well need to combine various stratagems, so as to further isolate and disintegrate these “hard core” reactionary elements, and lay the basis for engaging and thoroughly and decisively defeating what is left of the reactionary forces, once they had been weakened sufficiently.

All this would be radically different, in its guiding philosophy, its objectives and methods, from what can generally be considered “terrorist” strategies—which

involve actions isolated from masses of people, and/or aiming their fire at non-combatant forces and utilizing means and methods that seek to forcibly terrorize the people, or sections of them, into accepting the aims of those practicing this kind of violence—and in general it would be radically different from the reactionary aims, approaches, and methods of historically outmoded forces, not the least of which are the imperialists themselves.

The above are basic elements of conceptualization—and, in significant aspects, reconceptualization—in regard to the question of revolutionary possibility. And of course, for a whole period of time, before there is a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary people, there remains the continuing need to develop a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of revolution overall and of the revolutionary struggle for power once the necessary conditions had come into being.

In conclusion, to respond to the fundamental question being posed by this letter from a reader: Yes, revolution is possible. Yes, even in the most powerful of imperialist countries, in the bastions of reactionary, oppressive rule throughout the world, revolution could prevail, could bring into being a radically different and far better society, and make a great contribution to achieving a radically different and far better world—if it were guided by a serious and scientific orientation, approach and methods—if the work of revolution were undertaken correctly, in the period before there is a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary people, and if the revolutionary struggle for power were guided by the correct theory and strategic conception once there were the leap to a revolutionary situation and the emergence of a revolutionary people, in the millions and millions, conscious of the need for revolutionary change and determined to fight for it.

Some Crucial Points of Revolutionary Orientation— in Opposition to Infantile Posturing and Distortions of Revolution

Revolution is a very serious matter and must be approached in a serious and scientific way, and not through subjective and individualistic expressions of frustration, posturing and acts which run counter to the development of a mass revolutionary movement which is aimed at—and which must be characterized by means that are fundamentally consistent with and serve to bring into being—a radically different and far better world. Revolution, and in particular communist revolution, is and can only be the act of masses of people, organized and led to carry out increasingly conscious struggle to abolish, and advance humanity beyond, all systems and relations of exploitation and oppression.

A bedrock, scientific understanding which must underlie the development of such a revolutionary movement is that:

The whole system we now live under is based on exploitation—here and all over the world. It is completely worthless and no basic change for the better can come about until this system is overthrown.

And that:

In a country like the U.S., the revolutionary overthrow of this system can only be achieved once there is a major, qualitative change in the nature of the objective situation, such that society as a whole is in the grip of a profound crisis, owing fundamentally to the nature and workings of the system itself, and along with that there is the emergence of a revolutionary people, numbering in the millions and millions, conscious of the need for revolutionary change and determined to fight for it. In this struggle for revolutionary change, the revolutionary people and those who lead them will be confronted by the violent repressive force of the machinery of the state which embodies and enforces the existing system of exploitation and oppression; and in order for the revolutionary struggle to succeed, it will need to meet and defeat that violent repressive force of the old, exploitative and oppressive order.

Before the development of a revolutionary situation—and as the key to working toward the development of a revolutionary people, in a country like the U.S.—those who see the need for and wish to contribute to a revolution must focus their efforts on raising the political and ideological consciousness of masses of people and building massive political resistance to the main ways in which, at any given time, the exploitative and oppressive nature of this system is concentrated in the policies and actions of the ruling class and its institutions and agencies—striving through all this to enable growing numbers of people to grasp both the need and the possibility for revolution when the necessary conditions have been brought into being, as a result of the unfolding of the contradictions of the system itself as well as the political, and ideological, work of revolutionaries.

In the absence of a revolutionary situation—and in opposition to the revolutionary orientation and revolutionary political and ideological work that is actually needed—the initiation of, or the advocacy of, isolated acts of violence, by individuals or small groups, divorced from masses of people and attempting to substitute for a revolutionary movement of masses of people, is very wrong and extremely harmful. Even—or especially—if this is done in the name of “revolution,” it will work against, and in fact do serious damage to, the development of an actual revolutionary movement of masses of people, as well as to the building of political resistance against the outrages and injustices of this system even before there is a revolutionary situation. It will aid the extremely repressive forces of the existing system in their moves to isolate, attack and crush those, both revolutionary forces and broader forces of political opposition, who are working to build mass political resistance and to achieve significant, and even profound, social change through the politically-conscious activity and initiative of masses of people.