

## Marxism Today

# Experience, and learning the hard way

by Bill F.

From the start of life, people experiment and learn from their experience, from doing and trying different things and from assessing the results. When people consciously attempt to change the situation, their experience is more intense and the learning more exact.

Sometimes the results are new or surprising, and can be either positive or negative according to one's expectations. On such occasions, our subjective understanding needs to change in order to keep aligned with the objective world, with the reality of the situation. We have to adjust our thinking and take account of the new conditions, even perhaps, change our opinions.

Even when the results merely confirm what had been suspected, our knowledge is richer and deeper because we now know that it really does conform to the objective world, to reality.

This is the principle of scientific experiment; a process of moving from partial and incomplete knowledge to a more complete knowledge. Mao Zedong explained the process of acquiring knowledge in detail in his article *On Practice* (1938), where he said, "...man's knowledge of a particular process at any given stage of development is only relative truth. The sum total of innumerable relative truths constitutes absolute truth."

This process holds true for understanding of the physical world around us, for relationships with other people, for developing scientific knowledge and for understanding the social relations of production and the class struggle.

The world in all its complexities, including the laws of science and the laws of class relations determined by the mode of production in society; all exist irrespective of our thinking. This is what Marxists mean by 'objective reality'. Marxists strive to



Mao Zedong: "Seek truth from facts"

align their thinking as closely as possible to objective reality, seeking to unravel the truth in things, seeking to reveal the trends that reflect the inner contradictions pushing forward the development of things.

### Political consciousness

Marxists use the term 'political consciousness' to describe the level of understanding of the reality of class struggle in human society, and especially, its specific characteristics in their own particular society.

However, before they can influence others and raise the level of political consciousness, revolutionary Marxists have to be assured that their own knowledge of events is accurate, and that their interpretations really do accord with objective reality. "Idealism and mechanical materialism, opportunism and adventurism, are all characterised by the breach between the subjective and the objective, by the separation of knowledge from practice." (Mao Zedong *On Practice* 1938)

In Australia there has been a history of people substituting wishes for reality – subjectivism. In some cases, this led to ultra-left errors and sectarianism, and ultimately to

isolation from the people. In other cases, this led to timidity and complacency, again resulting in isolation from the people.

This is not really surprising as revolutionary ideals and aspirations are in constant conflict with the prevailing and corrupting atmosphere of bourgeois ideology, the illusion of democracy, and the poison of anti-communism.

In spite of these difficulties, revolutionary Marxists have a critical responsibility for assisting and guiding people in analysing their experiences in the course of class struggle and thereby moving to a higher level of political consciousness.

### Lessons and illusions

In the current circumstances in Australia, the working people are getting some valuable experience with the Rudd Labor government, which has been in office for more than 18 months.

Many workers are disappointed and many are angry, especially those in the trade union movement concerned about the continuing existence of the anti-worker laws and the ABCC. Then there are those concerned about the government's weak response to climate warming and the degradation of Australia's river

systems. In both cases, there were powerful movements of the people that had contributed to Rudd's election victory and mobilised many working people who believed in Labor's promises.

Other issues over which people express disappointment or anger include the 'Intervention' in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, the ongoing commitment to imperialist war in Iraq and Afghanistan and the increased 'defence' spending tying Australia ever closer to US imperialism.

This experience of Labor in office opens up new opportunities for revolutionary political work, but there is no easy formula.

In spite of the harsh experience, many working people have great difficulty in breaking away from their attachment to Labor. They say, 'Well, they're better than the Libs' or "There's no alternative" and "We'll just keep chipping away from the inside" and so on.

These may be well-worn lines, but they are hard to dismiss. Labor has made some reforms that are better than Liberal Party policies, spending a bit more on health and education, for example. And a viable 'progressive' alternative to the two main parliamentary parties is a long way off, even if you count the Greens. Thus, they are able to rationalise remaining attached to the Labor Party and "chipping away from the inside."

This attitude is common among those trade union officials who rely on Labor Party endorsement to hold their positions. They say in private that the Labor leaders have 'sold out' the unions and the working class, but continue to give the Labor Party oxygen by handing over union affiliation fees. They are not ready to make the break. Subjectively, they wish that Labor would stand up for workers and would inspire and mobilise them against the monopoly bosses

and reactionaries, but that's never going to happen.

### Keep 'chipping away'

Faced with this dilemma, how can Communists raise political consciousness to the point where people are prepared to break from the parliamentary merry-go-round and find new forms of organisation and struggle?

Just haranguing them and denouncing Labor will only get their backs up.

It is far better to keep the communication going, to focus on points of agreement, to also keep 'chipping away' and looking for opportunities to engage people in activities and events that encourage struggle, lead to change, and further new experiences.

At the same time, more and more people are coming forward, wanting to take on the government and the monopoly bosses over union-bashing, over climate warming and the environment, over war policies and other issues. The actions and struggles of the more politically conscious sections must be supported and assisted, and their example used to activate the less active.

As Mao Zedong put it, "The masses in any given place are generally composed of three parts, the relatively active, the intermediate and the relatively backward. The leaders must therefore be skilled in uniting the small number of active elements around the leadership and must rely on them to raise the level of the intermediate elements and to win over the backward elements." (Mao Zedong *Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership* 1943)

Knowing just what to do is often a process of eliminating the alternatives, and people will always try what seems to be a shorter route. As experience is analysed, people come to recognise mistakes and blind alleys. It's called 'learning the hard way', but then, the lessons are well learned indeed.