THE COMMUNIST PHILOSOPHY OF KNOWLEDGE: PART II

"Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement." – V. I. Lenin

The previous column discussed the most important idea of the communist view of knowledge, that knowledge derives from practice and provides a guide to practice. Practice includes many activities: work, raising your family, class struggle, war, scientific experiments, etc. This column is about two different kinds of knowledge: generalizations, and theories.

Generalizations collect specific cases together and combine them into single statements: "Women usually get paid less then men," "Inspecting a bus is an easier job than fixing its brakes." "More ***Red Flags*** are sold at factory A than factory B." "There are no construction jobs in this city." "Most revolutions take place during or after a major war," etc.

Knowing generalizations is essential to plan and carry out all kinds of practical actions, including political organizing. But for many kinds of practice, from building a T.V. set to communist revolution, another kind of knowledge is necessary: theoretical knowledge. Knowledge of theories makes it possible to understand what lies behind events and makes them happen. For example, the statement "A capitalist economy goes into recession or depression roughly every eight years" is a true generalization, but it doesn't explain what causes these economic crises to happen or whether they must happen. Only theoretical knowledge allows us to do this.

Theories differ from generalizations in two ways. Every theory must have its own categories, the things and quantities that the theory uses to explain events. The categories of economics include price, value, labor, profit, wages, surplus value, etc. Categories of physics include force, energy, mass, atom, electron, etc. Categories of political theory include communism, socialism, capitalism, revolution, opportunism, revisionism, agitation, reform struggle, etc.

Some categories describe things that are easy to see or measure, like price in economics or weight in physics, but often categories describe things that are not obvious. Categories can describe aspects of reality that lie below the surface. Things like viruses, surplus value, atoms, or revisionism can't usually be seen, but they can be detected indirectly or figured out.

Bangladesh, 2005--Garment workers on strike

The second way that generalizations differ from theories is that theories have laws and principles that describe the connections between categories. For example, it is a law of physics that the rate at which an object speeds up is proportional to the force applied to it. It is a law of economics that the average price of something is proportional to the amount of human labor necessary to make it. It is a biological law that you can't get tuberculosis without being exposed to a certain kind of bacteria.

Laws like these have to be tested and confirmed in practice, but they can't always be formed the way that generalizations are, by summing up particular cases. Often the particular cases of theoretical categories can't be seen at all. Even when they can be seen, individual cases only tell us what has happened, not what can happen.

To prove that a theory is true, it is necessary to compare it to alternative ideas, test it in practice, and accept it only if it gives the best explanation of the facts. For example, capitalist economic theories claim that crises are not inevitable under capitalism, but can be prevented by government regulation. The communist explanation is that economic crises result from the rivalry between capitalists, which means they can't carry out a common plan to control their own markets. This means that crises must happen and can never be ended under capitalism.

Economic theories are certainly not the only ones we need in the fight for communism. We must extend and improve our political theories about the fight against revisionism and the mobilization of the working class to create and maintain communism. We must not only understand how to create theoretical knowledge and apply it in practice, we also need to learn how to modify theories that practice shows to be wrong. This "dialectic of theory and practice" will be the topic of our next column.