

Old Unions and New Unions

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THE central matter of discussion at the recent CEC plenum was the trade-union question. The discussion, one of the most thoroughgoing in the history of the Party, turned specifically around the question of the organization of new unions. The general result was that, while stressing the necessity for continuing and intensifying our general activities in the old unions, very much more emphasis, our main emphasis in fact, is to be placed upon the formation of new unions to organize the unorganized. The trade-union resolution says:

"The present period marks a decline of the traditional craft-unionism and the beginnings of a new unionism among the great masses of unorganized. It is of the most vital consequence that our Party take the lead in this struggle for a new unionism. The growing demand of the harassed unorganized masses for organization, the breakdown of the old unions under the employers' attacks, constitute a new situation and require a much stronger orientation towards building new unions among the unorganized masses."

The movement for the establishment of new unions comes from two directions: (1) From the necessity of creating organization in the unorganized industries; (2) From splits in the old unions in the semi-organized industries.

NEW UNIONS IN UNORGANIZED INDUSTRIES

The impulse for the formation of new unions in the unorganized basic industries comes from the pressure of the present industrial depression upon these masses of unorganized workers and from the total failure of craft-unionism in these industries.

It is especially the great mass of unorganized semi-skilled and unskilled workers in the basic industries who are now suffering from wage cuts, speed-up, unemployment, and generally worsening conditions. Under this pressure these masses of workers are developing an increasing mood for organization and struggle. This is exemplified by the New Bedford strike, the strike of the Oshawa automobile workers, the strike of the Bayonne oil workers, and the manifestly growing discontent in the rubber, meat-packing,

electrical-manufacturing, and other unorganized industries. The demand for the building of unions among them is insistent and growing.

The old trade unions are manifestly unable to meet the situation and to serve as the organs of struggle for these discontented masses of semi-skilled and unskilled workers. The situation was quite different during the employers' offensive in 1919-22. Then the old unions were widely established in the basic industries, including railroads, coal, steel, meat-packing, marine transport, etc. When the employers delivered their intensive assaults against the wage standards, hours, working conditions and organizations of the workers, the trade unions led the ensuing struggles in practically every industry. The role of independent unionism was almost nil. The I. W. W. had no big strikes. The battles of this period were the greatest in the history of the American working class. The trade unions, headed by betrayers, were the means through which the workers tried ineffectively to defend themselves.

The conditions are now radically changed. The old unions have been driven out of various of the basic industries completely, or their power has been so badly shattered that they can no longer function effectively. The struggle of 1919-22 was the decisive and losing stand of old-line trade unionism against trustified capital.

The existing unions have become more and more restricted to skilled workers and are increasingly basing themselves upon a policy of betraying the interests of the unskilled. In the 1919-22 offensive, the wages of the skilled workers, although somewhat favored, were also cut, which in many cases threw the skilled workers into the struggle. But in the present depression the organized skilled workers have largely escaped wage cuts, which tends to keep them out of the struggle and to make their organizations less capable of leading the masses of workers against the employers. The leaders of the old unions go faster and further to the right. Their program is one of company-unionizing the trade unions. They pass more and more into the service of the employers. This point needs no elaboration. The right wing leaders not only will not organize the great masses of workers, but they are one of the principal obstacles in the way of such organization.

Thus by the combined factors of the growing mood for struggle among the masses of super-exploited workers and the inability of the trade unions to furnish them the necessary organization and leadership, the formation of new unions among these workers becomes imperative. Always the problem of building unions in the

unorganized industries was pressing; now it is more so than ever.

The new unions must, of course, be industrial in character. They must be led by militant fighters and be imbued with a revolutionary spirit. Craft-unionism and all its practices are obsolete in trustified American industry.

NEW UNIONS FROM SPLITS OF THE OLD ONES

The second general current leading to the formation of new unions comes from the development of splits in the old organizations. As the reactionary trade-union leaders travel further to the right, and as, in alliance with the employers, they put into effect more and more their program of company-unionizing the trade unions, inevitably those sections of the existing labor movement which feel most keenly the wage cuts, speed up, etc., and the employers' offensive generally, tend to revolt against these leaders and to establish new unions capable of defending their interests.

This tendency is most clearly illustrated by developments in the mining and needle industries. In both these industries the workers are being subjected to a rapid worsening of their conditions. And in both, the official union leaders, acting as tools of the bosses, have proven utterly incapable of organizing the great masses of unorganized and of protecting the standards won by the organized workers during long years of struggle. Under their leadership the old unions in each case have become worthless. They disintegrate in size, in control, in militancy. The leaders have warred relentlessly against all tendencies to make the unions fighting organizations. Their system of betrayals, expulsions, terrorism, etc., forces the rank and file movements for effective fighting unions to go in the direction of building new organizations. The miners, with their organization broken and their conditions ruined by the betrayals of their officials, have definitely announced the formation of a new union. In the needle industry the trend towards a new union is far advanced in the case of ILGWU and furriers and for the same general reasons. The paths to this end have been somewhat different in the two industries, but the general direction has been inexorably the same. The coal miners and needle workers constituted the most advanced, most proletarian sections in the A. F. of L. Similar developments may be expected in other reactionary A. F. of L. unions when like pressure of wage-cuts, etc., is forced upon them.

The mining and needle trades unions were the most important fields of left-wing activity in the trade-union movement. The

development of new union tendencies amongst them together with the building of separate unions among the totally unorganized workers shifts all the more decisively our center of gravity to the formation of new unions as our basic trade-union policy.

WORK IN THE OLD UNIONS

Although the situation imperatively demands very much more stress upon the building of new industrial unions in the unorganized and semi-organized industries, it would be a great mistake to conclude from this that we shall abandon our work in the old unions. The CEC trade-union resolution says:

"The combined trade unions still have a membership of approximately 3,000,000. These we cannot surrender to the leadership of the reactionary bureaucrats. We must continue and expand our work among these organizations, to build our Party, and to capture the rank and file from control of the reactionaries."

The trade-union movement is in a life and death crisis. With its reactionary leadership, obsolete forms of organization, and antiquated practices, it cannot stand in the face of trustified industry. It would be a grave mistake to think that all these old unions generally can recover their lost ground, remodel themselves, and develop into real fighting organs of the masses. Undoubtedly very many are slated for destruction. Others will degenerate into near-company unions. The traditional craft union movement is doomed.

On the other hand, it would also be a serious error to conclude that all of them are practically dead. Many, such as the building trades, railroad trades, printing trades, etc., still possess a mass character and much vitality. Signs of a growing industrial depression multiply, and with the development of this depression the employers will intensify their attacks upon the trade unions. Discontent will spread among large masses of organized workers. They will resist, despite the class collaboration policy of the leaders. It is a major task of the Party to organize this resistance in the old unions. To do this the TUEL must be built into a mass left wing in the unions, and there conduct a militant struggle to revolutionize these unions. With its slogans of "Organize the Unorganized," "Amalgamation," "Strike Against Wage Cuts," "Fire Reactionary Leaders," etc., etc., the TUEL will lead the fight in the old unions against the reactionary leaders and the employers.

The slogan "Save the Trade Unions" can be utilized to mobilize the opposition in the old unions. As the organized workers see that their unions are being threatened with destruction by the employers' attacks, the more progressive and militant among them will unite to defend their organizations, using some form of the Save-the-Union slogan. The middle group will tend to organize and co-operate with the left wing. The so-called Muste Group, while not in itself large, is an evidence of this tendency. To consolidate the real opposition forces in the old unions is the task of the TUEL. It would be incorrect, however, to use the "Save the Trade Union" slogan in such decrepit organizations as those of the boot and shoe workers, steel workers, butcher workmen, etc.

A FLEXIBLE POLICY

Our Party trade-union policy must have three general phases: 1. The establishment of new unions in the unorganized and semi-organized industries; 2. The building and functioning of a left wing in the old unions; 3. The combination of both building new unions and working in the old unions in given industries.

Just a few words of explanation about the third phase of our policy: Undoubtedly in some instances, in the coming period, we will confront a situation where in a given industry there exists on the one hand a new union, and on the other hand remnants of the old organization. The prospect is for this state of affairs in the mining, textile and needle industries. In such situations we must not only build the new organizations, but also develop an organized TUEL opposition in the old ones wherever they have a mass character. The new unions and the opposition in the old unions must work jointly for a revolutionary labor movement.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNORGANIZED

The organization of the unorganized masses is the major industrial task of the Party. The foregoing paragraphs point to the general organization line this work must take. The CEC trade-union resolution definitely outlines our specific tasks in the various industries. To repeat these here is not necessary. But it is necessary to emphasize that our Party throw its full forces into the work. It cannot function in a leading role in the American class struggle unless it is the leader in the building of the new unionism.

Very important for the success of this organizing work is the systematic establishment of Party nuclei and shop papers in the strategic industries. These will serve as invaluable points of contact for the launching of organization and strike movements.

In our basic work of organizing the unorganized, the TUEL will play an important role. In addition to functioning as the left wing in the old unions, the TUEL will launch and carry through campaigns to organize the unorganized into new unions. In many instances it will also serve as a center for various local unions until definite national union centers can be established. The building of the TUEL in all industrial centers, and the drawing into it of groups of representative workers from all the unorganized local industries, becomes vitally important in organizing the unorganized.

The new industrial unions can be established only in the face of most bitter resistance from the employers. Old line trade unionism in the United States as well as in Germany, England and other countries was built up while industry was still in a competitive state. It will be quite a different thing to establish the new unionism in the face of gigantic combinations of capital and the violently hostile government of the United States. But difficult though the task may be, our Party must plunge into it with all its resources.

LOSOVSKY'S CRITICISMS

Much point was lent to the CEC plenum discussions by the caustic criticisms of Comrade Losovsky of our trade-union policies. Many of these criticisms are manifestly incorrect, such as charges that we are "dancing quadrilles around the A. F. of L," that we "always defer to the leaders of the reformist trade unions with requests to organize the unorganized, save the unions, lead strikes, etc.," that we have "metaphysical misconceptions of the united front, etc." Comrade Losovsky also fails to sufficiently analyze the American situation and to give a clear line for our work inside the old unions, and the relation this will bear to the establishment of new organizations. These objections are dealt with in detail in the trade-union resolution, and need not be discussed here again. But what is valuable in Comrade Losovsky's criticism is that it calls sharply, even if violently, to the attention of the Party the timely question of establishing new unions.

Although our Party, within the past two or three years, has been increasingly supporting the formation of new unions and directly carrying through the organization of the unorganized in the various industries, as exemplified by our policies in the automobile, needle, coal, shoe, textile, meat-packing, marine transport, and other in-

dustries, nevertheless, we have not done this with a clear enough perspective as to where we were going. Nor have we thrown a fraction of the necessary energy into the work. We have been too slow to draw the full implications of the pressure of the industrial depression upon the unorganized masses of semi-skilled and unskilled and the breakdown of the old trade unions, both of which factors greatly emphasize the necessity of establishing new unions. The Party has oriented itself too slowly to the formation of new unions. Comrade Losovsky's articles and speeches, despite their harsh tone and frequent inaccuracy and insufficiency, serve to emphasize this problem and to give us needed stimulation in its clarification.

Opponents of our movement such as the I. W. W., One Big Union, Lore, etc., etc., seize upon Comrade Losovsky's criticisms and attempt to twist them into a refutation of our general Party policy. They claim that Comrade Losovsky's attitude constitutes a reversal of our policy of boring within the old unions, and a justification of their dual unionism. But this is nonsensical. The organizational thesis of the 4th Congress of the RILU says:

"In the United States the RILU adherents should develop and strengthen their activity in the unions affiliated to the reactionary American Federation of Labor."

Our basic trade-union policy remains the same. It was right in the past and it is right now. It has nothing in common with traditional dual unionism! We participate actively in all mass trade unions and seek to revolutionize them. The question at issue is one of emphasis. The objective situation demands that we put much more emphasis upon the establishment of new unions. But it does not imply that we shall abandon the old organizations. Our flexible policy of building new unions and working within the old ones where they have a mass character is quite a different thing from the inflexible sectarian dualism of the I. W. W.

On the one hand, we must guard against the fetish of unity with the old trade unions at any cost, and on the other hand, of independent unionism in all cases. Either of these wrong policies would isolate us from the masses. Our present policy is a continuation and a development of our old policy. Wherein it differs from that of the past is that it lays more stress upon the formation of new unions, in accordance with the changed objective situation.