

On the Question of Trade Union Democracy

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IN the recent Plenum of the Central Committee a very important issue, together with the vital question of practical programs of partial demands for the everyday struggles of the workers, was the matter of trade union democracy, especially with regard to the TUUL unions. But the conception of trade union democracy does not cover the entire breadth of the question. Involved in it is the whole relationship of the Party to the broad masses of the working class.

The Plenum discussion showed conclusively that in the trade union work there have been decided tendencies to ignore the rank and file of the workers in the development of programs of demands and in carrying through various other basic activities of the unions. Thus, in some cases, union constitutions have been changed, leaders have been elected and removed, and even strike calls issued without the development of a real mass participation in the taking of such important actions. And, needless to add, similar bad tendencies have crept into other departments of the Party's mass work.

Such practices are bureaucratism in its worst form. They sever as with a knife the contacts of the Party with the broad masses. We cannot maintain our mass contacts with mere talk, however eloquent or revolutionary it may be. Trade unions and mass organizations generally—hence the Party's relations with the great masses—can prosper only if the body of the workers are actually drawn into the throbbing life of such organizations. The bureaucratic methods which have been so much in evidence in our mass work are the surest road to sectarianism and isolation.

The discussions at the Plenum did much to clarify this whole question. Especially in the case of the unions was there demonstrated the fundamental necessity of securing mass participation in the real life of these organizations—in the formulation of partial demands, the building of the leadership, the carrying through of organization campaigns, the preparation and conduct of strikes. Trade union democracy was shown to be one of the elementary necessities for building the revolutionary unions. All of which

is fully in line with the great importance attached to this whole matter by the Comintern and Profintern.

But evidently the full depth of the question was not made clear at the Plenum, despite the importance of the progress that was made. For one hears in the Party such arguments, in substance, as this: "Yes, in the past we have made serious mistakes in not more systematically consulting the rank and file on important questions, and this must be corrected. We must popularize our demands more skillfully and thus induce the workers really to consider them their own. For it is, after all, basically a question of popularization, because the Party, not the masses, actually decides what the policy shall be."

Such an argument is in serious error. While it makes a show of defending the correct principle that the Party is the vanguard and leader of the working class, it also contains the wrong assumption that the Party only teaches the masses and can learn nothing from them. Such a position assumes incorrectly that Communists have a sort of airtight monopoly on working class knowledge and wisdom. This goes counter to the whole principle of trade union democracy and falsifies the entire line of relations between the Party and the broad masses. It is a shortcut to isolation.

Lenin had no such ideas. Although no one ever lived who had a clearer appreciation of the fundamental necessity of revolutionary theory and of the leading role of the Party as the bearer and developer of that theory, yet he was ever ready to learn from even the simplest of workers. He realized that the revolutionary strategist, in order to work out successful programs of struggle, must know exactly how capitalist exploitation is affecting the workers at a given time, and just how and to what extent they are reacting against it—knowledge that can be gained only from the very closest contact with the workers. He also realized the tremendous fund of native intelligence among the broad masses of producers, an intelligence most helpful to the Party in every phase of its struggle and which now in the Soviet Union is enriching all sections of the social life.

Upon innumerable occasions Lenin emphasized the necessity of learning from the workers, and in his personal life he lived up to this conviction. On this matter Krupskaya, in her recent book, speaks much of Lenin's extensive personal correspondence with workers. Referring to the correspondence before 1905, she says: "These workers' letters told Ilyitch more plainly than anything else that the revolution was approaching."

Stalin, in his book on Leninism, also stresses this matter. He says:

“The Party must have a good ear for the voice of the masses, must pay ~~close~~ attention to their revolutionary instinct, must study the actualities of their struggle, must carefully inquire if their policy is sound—and must, therefore, be ready, not only to teach the masses, but to learn from them.”

In no phase of our Party work does the double role of the Party in at once teaching the non-Party masses and learning from them manifest itself more sharply than in the trade union work, in the elementary struggle at the point of production. Here, as in our work in general, we can succeed in developing a realistic policy and a broad mass movement only if we have in high degree what Stalin calls “a good ear for the voice of the masses.” In the trade union work even the first approach to effective struggle requires the most intimate and widespread contacts with the masses of workers.

Illustrating this fact was an incident reported by Comrade Mel-don to the recent Plenum. It had to do with the working out of demands for the Youngstown steel workers. Below are the demands. The first set, as they were developed by our top functionaries in their offices with little or no consultation with the workers, and the second set, as these same demands looked after they had been amplified and reshaped by a group of steel workers of the hot mill department:

I. ORIGINAL DEMANDS

1. Seven-hour day, five-day week.
2. Abolition of the speed-up system.
3. Full social, racial, and political equality for Negroes.
4. Social insurance.
5. 25 per cent general wage increase.
6. Equal pay for equal work for young workers.
7. Recognition of the Metal Workers Industrial League.

II. AMENDED DEMANDS

1. Four six-hour turns, five-day week.
2. Against the tonnage and bonus system.
3. Half day's wages when called to work and sent home due to no work.
4. No less than \$35 a week for the following jobs: meshers, cranemen, openers, doublers.
5. Equal pay for equal work for Negroes.
6. No doubling up.

7. No "voluntary contributions" weekly by the workers for the "unemployed and sick" who have been discarded by the company.

8. 10 per cent of the huge yearly profits of the company to go for the unemployed and sick relief, administered by a committee of workers from all departments and one representative from the company.

From even a glance at these amended demands, which in some respects supplement, rather than substitute the original demands, it is evident immediately that in this typical instance the Party very definitely learned something from consulting the workers on the job. For one thing, and this is the most important, the demands have been concretized. They have been brought down from the realm of broad generality to that of direct application. They have been translated into terms of the workers' life and experience. This means that they have been brought from the stage of propaganda to that of action. From issues in which the workers have only the most general interest, they have been built into demands which the workers understand and will fight for. All of which, of course, is of the greatest importance for the development of the struggle.

From this are we to conclude, therefore, that in such matters the Party has no role, that the formulation of partial demands might better be left altogether to the masses? Such a conclusion would be ridiculous. In this particular instance the trouble was not in the main line of the Party, which was correct, but in not sufficiently sharpening up that line by basing it in the very lives of the workers. The whole thing is a graphic illustration of the necessity of a genuine trade union democracy.

In these demands, even after their reformulation, there is exhibited an interesting example of the need for the leadership of the Party. This is for the correction of certain errors that have been allowed to creep into the demands. For example, as in demand number 7, where the proposal should be to cut off all contributions to the company and not simply those for "discarded" workers (a separation of the employed from the unemployed), and as in demand number 8, where it is incorrectly proposed to have a representative of the company included in the workers' committee. Here, typically, the Party, with its better revolutionary theory and understanding, must function to clarify the line.

This entire incident of the steel workers' demands may seem minor in character. But it is a practical illustration of how the Party must learn from the masses of workers while at the same time giving them political leadership. We must bear this in mind

constantly, on pain of making many very serious political mistakes. If, for example, our unemployment insurance bill had been formulated in more close consultation with the workers we would not be confronted with the necessity of making radical changes in it. Here was one case where we had a very dull "ear for the voice of the masses."

The problem is not that we have to develop broad consultation with the workers simply so that we can induce them to accept our line. It is a broader question than that. It is so that we may know what the actual situation is and what should be our line in the immediate struggle. Yes, and often after such mass discussion with the workers we will have to discard some of our pre-conceived ideas of the immediate tactics and adopt a more realistic line which the workers will support. The working class provides not only the organizational strength and revolutionary inspiration for our Party, but also its ideological strength. The development of a healthy trade union democracy is not only necessary for the building of the revolutionary unions but also for the growth of our Party into a mass Communist Party.

