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# What Kind of a Party?

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What kind of a party? That is the question. We are turning a new page in the history of the American movement and it is important that we agree amongst ourselves now as to what we wish to write upon it. Two fortunate circumstances have conspired together to give us this opportunity; the one being the favorable political development in America, and the other the intervention of the Communist International, which has prodded the party forward to take full advantage of this favorable development.

We are fighting our way, as a party, back into the open. After long argument and a push from Moscow, we are undertaking to establish and maintain an "Open Communist Party." What kind of party do we want it to be — large or small, broad or narrow? The next future of the party depends, to a large extent, upon the answer we give to this question.

It faces us at every turn. Every time we discuss a question of policy it has to be considered. New contacts we are making with radical trade unionists compel us to think about it. It was brought to the front again by the recent declaration of Scott Nearing, in which he showed a very friendly attitude toward us. Some party members, myself among them, have frankly welcomed the prospect of such additions to our ranks, on the condition, of course, that they agree to our general statement of principles. Others, with equal frankness, express fears about admitting those who may not be 100 percent "kosher" into the party, which, according to their view, already has too

many "Centrists." They think the party suffers now for lack of purity; we say its main weakness is that it is not big enough and not broad enough.

Which point of view is correct? The answer depends upon another question, the one asked at the beginning of the article: What kind of party?

If you have the small party idea, if you think the "million masses" — to borrow a phrase from Daniel DeLeon — can be led by a clever clique, you will very naturally fear the influx of new elements. On the other hand, if you see things as we see them, you will prop the door wide open and, if necessary, kick out the window. We try to look at the American situation as it really is, and to shape our tactics accordingly. We see the best organized and most powerful capitalist class on earth; we see a highly developed labor movement and a strongly entrenched bureaucracy at the top of it, and we say: Only a big party can cope with this situation. Our greatest danger, from which we must flee as from a pestilence, is the tendency toward sectarianism, the tendency to let the party degenerate into a small, self-satisfied, exclusive circle of narrow partisans without influence on events about it and without receiving any control from them.

Scott Nearing and the large group whom he, to a certain extent, typifies and symbolizes — former Socialists, former IWWs and trade union radicals — are very close to us. We can assimilate the bulk of them if we really make the effort. They have no set prejudices against us; no opposition in principle. They are separated from the party

mainly by doubt, hesitation, and pessimism. And they lack confidence in the party. All these difficulties can be overcome by systematic work and a friendly, sympathetic attitude toward them.

For us it is a life and death proposition to draw in these new elements, to start a definite movement toward the party within the next year. The party has big tasks before it and it must grow bigger to meet them. We must get more members into the party. We must get them quickly. Our failure to do so, with external conditions so favorable, will prove there is something wrong with us.

The membership of the Trade Union Educational League is much broader than that of our party. It embraces many elements who are far from understanding the fine points of Marxian theory. Yet it works. It is causing Gompers more concern than any small group of pure disciples ever did. The reasons for its success are clear enough. One reason, and not a small one either, is that it set out at the start to be a broad movement, a sweeping movement, drawing in everyone who wants to fight the labor fakirs and the bosses. Another reason is that it has its feet on the solid ground of reality. The revolutionary implications of its propaganda and activity are clear and unmistakable; but it does not deal exclusively or mainly in the ultimate. It is taking hold of the workers in the trade unions because it has something to say and do concerning the concrete problems which press hard against them in their daily lives. Incidentally, and for these reasons, the Trade Union Educational League is a revolutionary factor of great importance. The man in the shop will listen to a little talk about the final revolution from a man who works and fights beside him in a practical way; the propagandist who hurls an abstract proclamation at him from somewhere "above the battle" gets no attention.

Everyone in our party recognizes the great importance of the Trade Union Educational League. It is undoubtedly true that with many this recognition is as yet theoretical and platonic

— it does not result in any serious consequences. It is sufficient now to note this. I intend to speak about it more fully in another article. We are dealing here with theories of the movement; and since we are all united on the question of the Trade Union Educational League — in theory — we can proceed from a common point.

The question is: What shall be the future relation between the party and the League, and what can we learn from the experience of the League? Up to the present time we have taken it as a matter of course that the League should organize the militant left wing of the trade unions into a broad organization while the party should aim only to be a small nucleus within it, supporting it in every way and trying to exert an influence on its general policy. This theory has been pretty generally accepted and has worked out fairly well so far.

Now, since we are "starting a new chapter in our work," we ought to ask ourselves whether this theory is the best one possible, or whether this relation between the party and the trade union left wing is necessarily permanent. Undoubtedly it was the only thing possible at the start, in view of the weakness of the party and the strength of the left wing. But I am of the opinion that we can and should now take a leaf from Foster's book. I think we should set to work with the conscious purpose of making the party as broad as the militant left wing in the trade unions and identical with it. The party should not be always a small nucleus within the left wing but it should aim to become, in time, the left wing itself.

Is there anything startling in this proposal? There shouldn't be. In almost every other country the situation which I have set up as a goal to strive toward has already been reached. The Communist Party, being the only revolutionary party, has quite naturally become the undisputed leader of the revolutionary left wing in the world labor movement. Everywhere — except America. Here the party was so small, so obscure, so unequal to

its task, that the leadership of the left wing passed over to a non-partisan body. We must admit that this non-partisan body has done a very good job so far, with our help. But he who is satisfied for the party to be a helper in a big enterprise doesn't think much of the party; and he forgets its historic mission, which is to be the leader of the majority of the working class through the revolution. We are far from that now. Long before we reach that point we must prove that we are able, as a party, to lead the revolutionary minority in the trade unions. The party can fill this more modest role only on one condition: that the party grows much bigger, broader, and more realistic and practical in its work.

During the six months I was in Moscow [from June 1, 1922] I studied the tactics of the International on this point with special interest because I already had the opinion that our party was much smaller and narrower than it needed to be and that the fault lay, partly, with our own conceptions. That opinion was strengthened and confirmed by what I learned there. The expression "mass party," which the great leaders never tire of hammering into the young Communist Parties, means what the words say. The Communist Party must not only aim to be the leader of a mass movement; it must itself be a mass movement.

It is a great mistake to think that all the parties in the Comintern are already thoroughly Communist in their activity as well as in their programs. I had a pretty good chance to see them as they really are — the actions of one or more of them were being constantly considered by the Executive Committee — and I came to the conclusion that there are few which are "purer" in the doctrinal sense than our own. There is no group in our whole party that ever went so far to the right as the Center of the French party, which represented at the time a majority of the members, or the ruling faction of the Norwegian party. Yet the International did not start a "Centrist" hunt.

They demanded the exclusion only of those individuals who were clearly anti-communist — bourgeois agents in our ranks. They dealt very patiently and carefully with those who, while far from being thoroughgoing Communists, showed the will to move in the right direction. The International tried in every way to hold on to those who, as Zinoviev said, "want to be Communists."

The meaning and the purpose of this strategy became very clear to me. The leaders of the Comintern start out with the idea that we must get large masses of workers into our party and still larger masses to follow its leadership. That is the main idea behind all of their maneuvers and they never lose sight of it. We must have the masses, so they reason; otherwise we are bound to lose, no matter how good our intentions. We must break ever-larger numbers from the influence of the reformists and the bourgeoisie and get them under our influence. And we must swell the membership of the party — make it a "mass party." That is the *sine qua non*, the condition without which the victory of the proletariat is impossible.

Germany is a smaller country than the United States and the struggle for power there will certainly be no harder than here. Yet the German Communist Party, with its 250,000 members, is not yet large enough or influential enough for the task. Zinoviev suggested to the German comrades the slogan of "A Million Members for the Party!" Those who have the small party idea in America might very profitably reflect on this.

We hear it stated often in support of the small party theory that the Bolsheviks of Russia had but 10,000 members "at the time of the revolution." This is true — if you mean the Kerensky revolution, which put the bourgeoisie in the saddle. But during that same speech where he suggested the slogan to the German party, Zinoviev pointed out that the Bolshevik party had a quarter of a million members at the time it led the struggle for power in October. Of course, he made it clear that the influence of the party is not measured exactly

by size. The fundamental requirement is the support of a majority of the working class. The German party may accomplish this with less than a million members; but it will be more apt to accomplish it with them.

It is claimed that there is danger in a conscious effort to broaden the party, a search for large numbers of new members quickly, and an adaptation of the party's tactics to facilitate this end. These questions are asked: "If we run after members, will not Centrists, even opportunists, find their way into the party? Is there not danger that our doctrine will be diluted and the party lose its firm communist character?"

To the first question, we must frankly answer, "Yes." As the party broadens itself it will undoubtedly attract some elements who cannot be assimilated and whom we will eventually have to discard. But we will easily cope with that danger if we have confidence in ourselves. A healthy body does not avoid disease germs, it throws them off. Besides, that danger is only incidental — it is one of many that we cannot possibly avoid if we are going to be a serious party playing a serious part in the class struggle. The real danger before the American movement at the present time is that we may allow it to remain small and doctrinaire — a little clique of personal friends and partisans, running no risks because it is afraid of them.

The second danger, that our doctrine will be diluted, we need not fear at all. Communist principles and tactics, as taught by the great leaders, are made of the stuff of life; they live and thrive on contact with reality. They have no meaning

except as they are put to constant use and to every test. Communist principles are living things. They have no significance standing alone. They are made to mix with the mass labor movement and from that mixture fruitful issue comes. If you believe in the principles and tactics of communism, put them to work! Give them a real chance to show how strong they are. The result will be, not to weaken and dilute the party, but to build and strengthen it and clarify its purpose and multiply our own faith and confidence a thousand times. The movement to broaden the party, in its membership and in its activities, is not a departure from communist principles and tactics. On the contrary, it is based on the desire to really begin to apply them in America.

Broaden the Party! — that is our slogan. It represents in a word the will of those who are dissatisfied with the present, but who are filled with confidence for the future. We believe that our party, after 4 years of experience and with the help of the International, is finding the right road. That road leads to a bigger and broader party, working and fighting realistically in the heat of the daily struggle, and extending its influence over an ever-widening circle of conscious workers. This is not merely a pious aspiration on our part. The conditions for the making of that kind of a party we want are already at hand. The conditions are at hand for the making of such a party within a comparatively short time. We cannot fail unless we ourselves fail to understand what it is we have to do.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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