

# PARTY PRE-CONVENTION DISCUSSION SECTION

## Bourgeois Reformism and Social Reformism

By WILLIAM Z. FOSTER.

This is the concluding article of omrade Foster on the issues raised in his article "The Decline of the A. F. of L." in the Jan.-Feb. issue of "The Communist", and in the editorial answer in the same issue as well as in the state-

ment on it by Comrade Bittelman and other comrades of the Opposition.

In "The Communist" for May, 1928, Comrade Pepper put forth his ideas of the perspectives of the A. F. of L. Inasmuch as this article has never been repudiated by Comrade Lovestone and the others of the CEC Majority it may be assumed that they subscribe to it also, especially as it dovetails with their general political line. In the article in question Comrade Pepper outlined three possible lines of labor union development, point one of which reads, "An influx of new masses into the American Federation of Labor." Then he proceeds to show how "new millions of unskilled workers streamed into the trade unions" in Great Britain in the nineties, and how during the war period many millions of workers were organized into the German and American trade unions. The implications are clear. It is a theory of the re-building of

### Criticism of Majority of C.E.C.

The CEC Majority statement criticizing my article in "The Communist" tries to defend this theory of the re-building of the A. F. of L. by quoting the Comintern theses to the effect that "the process of stabilization creates an economic basis for social democracy and, on the other hand, the contradictions of stabilization create a basis for the development of the Communist Parties". This Comintern analysis is correct, but what the Majority comrades fail to see is that the existence of such a base for reformism does not necessarily imply a re-growth of the A. F. of L. unions,

the A. F. of L. on a mass scale, including not only skilled workers but great sections of unskilled and semi-skilled.

Comrade Pepper's theory flows directly out of the CEC Majority's economic analysis, which foresees a long period of "prosperity", during which, the assumption is, the reformist unions will grow, more or less as they did in pre-war periods of industrial activity. But this theory has many holes in it. To begin with, it is based upon the usual over-estimation of the CEC majority regarding the strength of American imperialism. It ignores the deepening inner contradictions. It also ignores the whole concrete process of the grafting of the trade unions onto the organizations of the employers. Finally, it is in conflict with the general trend of reformist development in this country.

as they foresee it. The elaborate machinery of bourgeois reformism must be reckoned with.

It is the characteristic of the American situation that during the past several years, when the basis of the corrupted upper strata of the working class was broadest, when the cultivation of reformist illusions was not widespread, when "prosperity" was at greater heights than ever before, that was exactly the time of the decline of the A. F. of L. The employers were able to substitute their own direct bourgeois systems of reformism for traditional social democratic trade unionism.

Bourgeois reformism was a method of struggle of the capitalists against the trade unions in this period of industrial activity. A basic part of the open shop campaign, it drove them out of trustified industry and into a precarious existence in lighter, competitive industry. Not an era of "prosperity", but direct pressure from the masses undergoing radicalization, and the growing war situation, will make the employers use the A. F. of L. more in the industries against the workers, and this will be along the lines of company unionization that I have indicated.

Here let me dispose of the criticism, made by both Majority and Minority, that I challenge the existence of a real base for the revolutionary unions by making it contingent upon whether or not the old unions will grow. This is direct misrepresentation of my position. For me the basis of the new unions is clear, among the great masses of unskilled and semi-skilled workers which the A. F. of L. cannot organize. What I do in my article is to polemicize against "the writings and speeches of Comrade Pepper, Lovestone and Weinstone" which, while tipping the hat to the new unions, either directly propose or imply such theories of the rebuilding of the A. F. of L. on a mass scale as to leave practically no base whatever for the new unions. I am correct in saying that the question

of the base of the new unions is involved when these comrades sponsor conceptions which look forward to

### Criticism of Comrade Bittelman.

Comrade Bittelman sees a somewhat different line of trade union development than Comrade Pepper, but also an incorrect line. He does not seem to anticipate the rebuilding of the A. F. of L., with the inclusion of great masses of semi-skilled and unskilled. Nor, on the other hand, does he accept the company-unionization process which I have outlined. What he sees is a "strengthening of the A. F. of L." (citing the action of the Taylor Society and the growth of the Muste group as examples), apparently in the direction of extending it along lines of craft unions of skilled workers.

This theory of a new growth of craft unionism, more or less of traditional type, is based upon a static conception of the role of reformism. It does not see crisis or decline possible with reformist trade unions. Moreover, it has only an abstract conception of the actual process of the grafting of the trade unions onto the organizations of the capitalists. It does not see the merging ideologically and organizationally of bourgeois reformism and social re-

the inclusion of vast masses of unskilled and semi-skilled into the A. F. of L. unions.

formism into a semi-company unionism form of social reformism. When the Comintern speaks of this grafting on tendency it does not mean only that the trade union and social democratic party leaders are being drawn into the government to facilitate war preparations, which is about all that Comrade Bittelman's theory sees, but also that the "grafting on" process proceeds directly in the industries in movements for "industrial peace," "industrial democracy", etc. Neither Comrade Bittelman nor Comrade Pepper explains the latter process, which I have concretized under the formula of the company-unionization of the trade unions. The meaning of the proposal of the president of the Taylor Society for the recognition of the trade unions by big capital (which Comrade Bittelman cites in support of his proposition) is exactly company unionization, not the rebuilding of old line craft unionism.

Comrade Bittelman's theory also tends too mechanically and too completely to separate the unskilled and skilled in the national union centers. We are now entering upon a pro-

longed period of dual unionism. The new revolutionary center, the T. U. E. L., will be based upon the masses of semi-skilled and unskilled, and the old unions are based upon the labor aristocracy. But this does not imply that the division of skilled and unskilled between the two centers is exact or that we shall acquiesce in it. Such ideas lead straight to the abandonment of the old unions to Green and Company. We must realize that there will be war to the knife between the two centers for control of the masses.

The major task of the T. U. E. L.,

likewise of our Party, will be to organize the unorganized masses of unskilled and semi-skilled; but we will also fight to win away the skilled and other workers affiliated to the A. F. of L. unions. On the other hand, the A. F. of L. will fight not only to control the skilled workers, but also to defeat our efforts to organize the unskilled and to bring these under its own treacherous influence. Failure to see this overlapping struggle means not to understand the strike-breaking role of the A. F. of L. It leads to quitting the old unions.

### 8. In Conclusion.

Now let me briefly summarize by unions upon the skilled and unskilled, indicating the strong and weak points of my article in "The Communist". In spite of a number of hastily written phrases, the article is correct in pointing out, among other things, the decline of the A. F. of L. as an organ of struggle of the workers, its crisis as a reformist organization, the incorporation of the A. F. of L. bureaucracy into the war machine of American imperialism, the concrete process (company unionization) of the grafting on of the reactionary trade unions to the employers' industrial organizations, the exposure of the fallacies of the rebuilding of the A. F. of L. on a mass basis, the surrender of the A. F. of L. bureaucracy to bourgeois reformism and the emergence of a new fascist-like social reformism, the basing of the new revolutionary

etc. As for the criticisms to the effect that I have made the growth of the new unions contingent upon no growth of the old unions, that I do not see the economic base of social reformism, and that I ignore the decisive role of the Party in the struggle, I have shown in the above that they do not apply. The weak spot in the article is its failure to make clear the fact that although there has been such a vast growth of open bourgeois reformism, social reformism, centering in the A. F. of L. bureaucracy, remains the main danger and that we must concentrate our main fire against it. Of course, the article calls for the most relentless struggle against this corrupt leadership, but this is not enough.

But my critics have no ground for such heat and self-praise as they display. They would do well to indulge in some healthy self-criticism, for they have also made the mistake of failing to center the attack upon the A. F. of I bureaucracy and the S. P. The fact are these: The 6th World Congress Theses laid the utmost stress upon the necessity for struggle against social democracy. But neither the Majority nor the Minority of our CEC took this seriously as applying to the United States. Doubtless this was because of the weakness of the A. F. of L. and the S. P. the liquidation of the labor party movement, on the one hand, and the luxuriant growth of open bourgeois reformism on the other. So, instead of directing the main fire against social reformism, it continued to be directed against capitalist reformism in general. Many documents (including the Majority and Minority theses and my own article now under fire) were written around this wrong line. It was another case of American exceptionalism to the line of the Comintern. Only when the mistake was pointed out by concrete criticism (which I agree with from the Comintern, contained in a draft of the approaching decision received several weeks ago, did the comrades make a quick "about face" and try more or less futilely to reorientate themselves to the new line. They have thereby not only made new mistakes, which I have criticized in the foregoing, but they have also exhibited a pitiful lack of Bolshevik self-criticism by failing to point out their own errors when they changed their line.

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