

# Some Elementary Phases of the Work in the Reformist Trade Unions

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**T**HIS article makes no pretense at being a thesis. It does not aim at covering every phase of the work in the old trade unions. Rather its purpose is to clarify a number of points upon which there is confusion, uncertainty, or neglect, and to make concrete application of the new methods of work to our tasks in the reformist unions.

## THE QUESTION OF PARTIAL DEMANDS

The Communist International has pointed out to us upon many occasions, and this is said afresh in the resolution of our 14th Plenum, that all our trade union work, as well as our Party's work in general, must have its starting point in the general struggles of the workers for their partial demands. And by this the Communist International does not mean simply the work of the revolutionary T.U.U.L. unions. All its argumentation and analysis applies with equal force to the work within the old trade unions. But of this fact we are not very conscious. Especially in our activities in the A. F. of L. and other conservative trade unions is it clear that we have not yet made the real turn to mass work. There above all our work bears the stamp of general agitation rather than that of concrete struggle.

This fact stands out definitely if we glance at the work upon the railroads, a vitally important sector of the old union activities. Here we find our program to be based still primarily upon the agitation of a few general slogans against the wage cuts, for unemployment insurance and the six hour day, etc. There is as yet hardly a trace of local programs of demands for the various shops, roundhouses, yards, etc. There is no Negro program, although this is the worst Jim-Crow industry in the country. The general result of this failure to concretize the struggle into fights over the daily grievances of the workers is, of course, that we have not succeeded in getting mass organization or leadership on the railroads. In the building trades and mining industry matters are not much better. And in the needle trades, we recently saw the left wing

minority of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, instead of proposing practical plans, commensurate with its weak forces and the mood of the workers, for struggles over less fundamental issues, announced the grandiloquent plan of building the new union and launching a general strike to abolish piece-work. Such a program in the given circumstances, could not but result in isolating us from the main body of the workers. It was only one more case of a sectarian substitution of glittering phrases for real struggle.

Such general agitation in the old unions must give way to definite struggle in support of the immediate economic demands if we are to make real progress. And the situation is ripe for such struggles over innumerable issues. It is not simply a case of mobilizing the organized workers to resist the general wage cuts that the bosses are forcing upon them. The employers are worsening conditions in every direction, systematically undermining the conditions provided for in the existing agreements. And one of the bitterest grievances of the rank and file is that their officials do not take up the fight to repel these attacks.

The question of the enforcement of the union agreements becomes a vital one for us. In the past our comrades have not made much of this matter, concluding that because the bureaucrats have signed these agreements we would compromise ourselves by demanding their enforcement. But this is a sectarian error. For the most part these agreements were signed during the "prosperity" period and hence provide for wages and working standards which the bosses, with the help of the labor fakers, are now breaking down. Hence, it becomes a major issue for us and one that the workers will easily understand and support, to demand the fulfillment of the agreements.

#### SHOP WORK AND THE REFORMIST UNIONS

But, of course, we cannot limit ourselves simply to the terms of the agreements. To do that would be to fall victims to the worst sort of trade union legalism. We must, on the contrary, wherever we have the power, establish the best possible conditions, agreements or no agreements. Moreover, we must link up the struggles of the various organized crafts and also seek to extend the union conditions to cover the unorganized workers. This whole matter of resisting the violation of the union agreements opens up one of the most fruitful ways for the development of the mass struggle of the organized workers and to strengthen our forces generally in the conservative labor unions.

Our work among the organized membership of the A. F. of L. must, like the work of the T.U.U.L. unions, be based upon the

shops and other work-places. It is not enough that we form opposition groups in the local unions; these must have as their foundation corresponding groupings in the shops. Thus the issues raised by us in the local unions must be enforced directly in the shops, and vice versa. It is idle to expect the bureaucrats to put them into effect in the shops even if they should be adopted in the local unions.

In the main our organization form in the shops must be based upon the group of workers supporting our general line. This group should hold meetings, taking up the various problems confronting the workers in the shop. It should aim at the development of united front shop machinery along the same lines as the revolutionary unions, that is, grievance committees and shop committees representative of the whole body of workers, organized and unorganized. In some instances there are skeleton trade union shop grievance committees at hand, and we should aim at capturing and broadening these into real organs of struggle. In other cases it will be necessary to build our shop organizations from the ground up; thus, for example, the proposed building trades job committees of all trades to stop "bootlegging" beneath the union scales and generally to enforce better conditions on the works.

Up till now our work in the reformist unions has been confined almost entirely within the locals. This has been largely divorced from the real shop life of the workers. A typical example of weakness in this respect existed in the anthracite. There, in spite of the fact that many locals had affiliated themselves to the opposition movement, the comrades made no effort whatever to take charge of the mine committees existing. They confined themselves to general agitation, neglecting the daily job grievances of the workers. When this shortcoming was pointed out to them they declared that any attempt to elect new grievance committees would meet the most violent resistance of the bureaucrats, the companies and the local government. All of which simply goes to show that the bosses and their labor leader tools had a far better appreciation of the importance of the mine committees and the control of the daily grievances of the workers than had opposition leaders.

The failure to base our A. F. of L. activities upon the shop is much illustrated during strikes. Our strike work takes on too much of a general agitational character, instead of being based directly upon the individual shops. A typical example of this was seen in the recent New York dress strike. Instead of the most careful and systematic organization and struggle shop by shop in the ranks of the workers, the tendency was towards general meetings, general demonstrations, general organization campaigns, etc., with

the natural result that we failed very much in establishing mass leadership.

These tendencies must be combatted. We must root our A. F. of L. work directly in the shops. Then it will have life and vitality. Then we will be able to build up some real and solid opposition to the misleaders in control of these organizations.

#### RELATIONS OF REVOLUTIONARY UNIONS AND MINORITIES

In our movement there is much confusion regarding the general question of the relationship between the revolutionary unions of the T.U.U.L. and the opposition movements in the reformist unions. This manifests itself in a variety of ways, all of which are harmful. It is very necessary that this whole matter be cleared up, so that the revolutionary unions and minorities may coordinate their work, supplementing each other in the general task of revolutionizing the workers.

One of the worst forms of this confusion is a tendency for the revolutionary unions to disassociate themselves altogether from the minority work, feeling little or no responsibility for it. Many examples of this are at hand. For example, when the recent convention of the United Mine Workers of America was called, by an official call sent to every local, by press notices, etc., the N.M.U. was so uninformed about it that it denounced the convention, which it discovered almost at the last moment, as a "secret convention." And the Metal Workers Industrial League, until recently, was quite unconscious of the necessity of building an opposition group in the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers. Even in the needle trades, where the minorities and the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union are beginning to work together, there is to be seen not only neglect of the situation in some organized trades but direct demands to be freed from the responsibility of developing activities there.

All this is wrong. The resolution on the T.U.U.L., adopted at the 8th session of the Red International of Labor Unions, says: "the leadership of the oppositions in the parallel reformist unions must be in the hands of the corresponding revolutionary unions." This means that the revolutionary unions must not only give direction to such work but also assume responsibility for it. This, however, does not require direct affiliation between minorities and unions. The minorities should give themselves such names as are most appropriate under the circumstances. They should send regular or fraternal delegations to the revolutionary union conventions, as their degree of strength permits. The same principle applies

to reformist locals under revolutionary leadership. Great flexibility must be shown in the matter of affiliations, delegations, names of opposition movements, etc., in order not to expose the workers needlessly to expulsion by the bureaucrats.

A further expression of the confusion upon this question of the relations between unions and minorities is the tendency for the revolutionary unions to assume the functions of the minorities during strikes of A. F. of L. unions. That is, they often undertake to give the most direct leadership to the striking workers instead of developing this initiative from an opposition movement within the striking union itself. A typical example of this took place in the Hocking Valley miners' strike where the N.M.U. organizers, instead of building an opposition base inside the striking U.M.W.A., tried directly to organize the workers into the N.M.U. and to lead the strike under the latter's name in spite of the fact that it had no members. In such situations the proper approach is through the organized opposition. This does not mean, however, that the revolutionary union has no open role to play. On the contrary, it must support the strike with all its forces and build up its united front contacts with the striking workers.

The grossest confusion of the roles of revolutionary unions and minorities exhibits itself in tendencies towards premature splits. In such cases, instead of developing as a minority within the old unions, the comrades become imbued with sectarian haste and, by a split, transform into an isolated and sterile independent union what could easily have been a powerful opposition movement. A serious example of this wrong tendency was shown in the split of the San Francisco painters. Instead of utilizing the great discontent of the workers to develop a powerful movement against the bosses and the local labor fakers this strong revolt was run into the ground by directing it into the formation of a separate union, and a national one at that.

#### THE QUESTION OF TRADE UNION UNITY

The question of trade union unity is always a burning one, and especially in this period of sharpening struggle. We must be the champions and fighters for such unity. Never should we lose the initiative in this vital matter. We must prove in deed, as well as in word, that we really stand for trade union unity. Only by fitting our daily practice to the most concrete fight for unity can we expose the fake unity proposals of the demagogues and convince the workers that we alone work for solidarity. Unfortunately, however, we have usually not done this.

Our main approach to the problem of unity is the united front.

The united front must be built from the bottom and established in the struggle. In order to build the united front we must actually fight for it. Up till now our united front work has been essentially formal and sectarian in character. It has consisted chiefly of our issuing united front manifestoes to the workers, calling upon them to join with us in struggle, and then, when they did not quickly respond, going ahead with the building of narrow united front organs of practically our own close connections.

Such methods are completely wrong, as the 14th Plenum resolution so sharply points out. We must actually penetrate the masses with our program and, in struggle against the bureaucrats, build the united front. We must go to the workers, not wait for them to come to us. During the recent New York dress strike some small advances have been made in this direction by the N.T.W.I.U. developing joint picket lines, joint demonstrations, etc., with the I.L.G.W.U. membership, and this richly repaid the N.T.W.I.U. in greater prestige and membership. But the real turn has not yet been made. In strikes we must not only propose one strike and one strike committee, but resolutely fight in the ranks of the striking masses to bring them to pass. In the particular cases of the Paterson and dress strikes it was clearly an error to set "our" strike date upon a different day than that of the bureaucrats as it tended to feed the idea that we did not want unity; in both cases we should have postponed our strike dates. Likewise, in these two strikes, as well as in the Lawrence strike, we did not actually penetrate the old unions with our demand for one strike committee. We should not only have raised this question in their meetings, through our minorities and rank and file delegations, but we should even have sent our delegates to the strike committees with our demands. Then it would have been clearer to the masses that ours was the unity program and that the bureaucrats were the splitters. Such boldness with the united front tactic will not weaken the revolutionary unions, as some fear, but enormously strengthen them.

The question of trade union unity raises the issue of amalgamation. What shall be our attitude upon this matter? In all our activities among the reformist unions, T.U.U.L. unions and unorganized we must work upon the principle of "one industry, one union," and we must be the leaders of every genuine movement in that direction. This means that we must base our unity movements at the bottom, in the shops, in the local unions, in the furtherance of the daily struggle. Our fight for trade union unity, based upon the united front, must be bound up with the struggle for organization on a shop basis, for real trade union democracy, for revolu-

tionary leadership and program. We cannot return to the unity program of 1922, which consisted of simply a general agitation for the amalgamation of the unions at the top. The Musteites and Lovestoneites so put the question at the present time. Moreover, they use the slogan of amalgamation as a substitute for all struggle, as a means for leadership to strengthen themselves at the expense of the rank and file. For us the very essence of the fight for trade union unity must be the strengthening of the workers at the base, in the shops and local unions, and the defeat of the reactionary leadership. Unity slogans must not substitute for struggle; unity must grow out of the struggle.

Bound up with the question of trade union unity is also that of the organization of the unorganized. For the organization of the great masses of unorganized we must look to the revolutionary unions. "Organize the unorganized" is basically the slogan of the T.U.U.L. It is idle to expect that the reactionary A. F. of L. will undertake this revolutionary task. Before the corrupt leaders and the employers would permit the A. F. of L. organization to be used for this purpose they would wreck it by splits, so that in any event the task would revert to revolutionary organizations. The Lovestone thesis of millions of workers streaming into the A. F. of L. in all industries, a theory fathered by John Pepper, is part of the renegades' program for fighting the T.U.U.L. It is a weapon against the actual organization of the unorganized.

#### THE EXPOSURE OF THE BUREAUCRATS

It would be a mistake on our part, however, to take a negative position in the old unions on the question of organizing the unorganized. Wherever the left wing is in control, or wherever it would strengthen the forces of the left wing, we should not hesitate to organize the unorganized. But in any event we can only bring members into the corrupt A. F. of L. on the basis that they have a fighting chance, under left wing leadership, to defend their interests. This means that whatever organization work we do must be accompanied by the most complete exposure of the bureaucracy and the organization of the new members definitely into the opposition. Otherwise we would be leading the workers, Muste fashion, into the sell-out trap of the A. F. of L. fakers. Where these fakers demagogically begin "organization campaigns," such as the Green-Muste Southern textile affair, we must expose them and fight for the conditions indispensable for real organization and struggle; that is left wing leadership.

A basic task of ours in the trade unions is thoroughgoing exposure of the reactionary leadership. Unfortunately, however, we are

carrying this out very inexpertly and casually. Too often our "exposure" of these fakers consists only of denunciation. And much of this denunciation, poorly documented, boomerangs against us when we do not actually prove it to the workers. This hit or miss method must be done away with at all costs. We must begin the most systematic exposure of the A. F. of L. leadership and especially their Musteite allies. We must follow them up with the most intimate, detailed and persistent exposure of their treacheries. Their relatively easy getaway after committing these crimes is due primarily to our failure to prove the goods on them and to thoroughly convict them in the eyes of the rank and file. This exposure, of course, must be linked at all points with our development of the daily economic struggle and the fight to clear out these fakers.

At this time the A. F. of L. leaders are doubly vulnerable to such exposure. The rank and file, radicalized by the crisis, are highly critical of them. The A. F. of L. leaders are in a very difficult position. Their "theory" is bankrupt; their high wages, "new capitalism" rubbish has crashed. Their practice exposes them more and more as bosses' agents; their Hoover-Green no-wage-cut agreement results in open wage slashes, and their handout unemployment relief campaign develops mass starvation. Their unspeakable graft and personal corruption have become a stench in the nostrils of the membership. Never was their prestige so low among the masses as now, and never was so good the opportunity to organize against them.

We must greatly sharpen the fight against them. We must thoroughly expose the fallacies and bankruptcy of their capitalist economic and political theories. We must drive the harpoon into them upon the question of unemployment insurance. We must call them to account in every local union for their Hoover-Green agreement and make them give an account of it. With the rising tide of sympathy for the Soviet Union among the masses of workers, we must nail down the fakers upon this issue and expose them as war-making tools of the employers. Likewise, we must greatly sharpen and systematize our fight against the bureaucrats upon their Jim-Crow Negro program and the rest of their reactionary policies.

Let me give one illustration of how we must make this fight: about a year ago the leaders of the Full Fashioned Hosiery Workers drove through an outrageous wage cut of about 40 per cent on the ground that it would be returned in a year, and that it would result in more work for the workers involved and also the complete unionization of the industries. Well, just as we said at the time, none of these things has happened. Now we must call these fakers



to book. We must bring clearly to the workers' minds exactly what the misleaders promised and how we warned them against these lying statements. It is only by such follow-up work that we can really convict these fakers and organize the workers to remove them. The danger in this typical case is that, as in so many others, we will not follow the reactionaries like a Nemesis but will let the whole matter slip and take refuge in general and unconvincing denunciation.

#### THE POSITION OF THE REFORMIST UNIONS

In order to avoid confusion in our work it is necessary that we pay much closer attention to what is taking place in the conservative unions and sharpen up our general analysis of them. These organizations, under pressure of the economic crisis, are running into real difficulties. We must understand the course and implications of these. Here, in this already long article, it is not possible to fully analyze the situation, but merely to indicate its general outlines.

Manifestly the employers' offensive is hitting the A. F. of L. membership hard through unemployment and wage cuts. This in itself would be bound to produce profound effects upon the craft unions. But these effects are intensified by the fact that the leadership has utterly failed to defend the workers' interests, and, on the contrary, has shamelessly betrayed them by openly collaborating the whole starvation program of the employers. The result is a situation already difficult in these organizations and threatening to become critical.

The growing difficulties of the reformist unions manifest themselves in many ways. Among the more important of these are: (a) an unparalleled radicalization of the rank and file; (b) a manifest bankruptcy of the theory and practice of the leadership in the economic crisis; (c) a huge decrease in union membership in the past 18 months, amounting in some cases to as high as 40%; (d) a serious financial crisis; (e) increasing signs of alarm and confusion among the top leadership, etc.

Although the situation is serious, we must be on our guard against "leftist" notions that at long last the A. F. of L. is falling to pieces and that all we have to do is to wait around and pick up the pieces as they fall. We may be certain of two things: first, that the employers will not so easily allow their precious strike-breaking A. F. of L. leadership to collapse in the face of their added necessity to fight the T.U.U.L. unions and revolutionary minorities but will give their labor leader agents still more recognition and assistance; and second, that the A. F. of L. leaders, in order to be able

to stay at the head of masses and betray them, will become more radical in words. In fact both of these tendencies are clearly in evidence: the first, in such movements as that to "rebuild the U.M.W.A.," the open support of the A. F. of L. crooks by the Department of Labor, the Norris-LaGuardia "anti-injunction" bill, etc., and the second, by the growing radical talk of A. F. of L. officials (McGrady speech, etc.), while their policies become ever more reactionary. The coming A. F. of L. convention will probably be, in words, the most "left" we have yet seen.

On the other hand, we must also be on our guard against the right opportunist Muste-Lovestone (Pepper) illusions about building the A. F. of L. into a great mass organization, with "millions streaming into the old unions" now that their membership, under pressure of the crisis, is waking up. We may be sure that the A. F. of L. leaders, assisted by the bosses, will prevent such a development. These leaders will try to make these unions job trusts of the employed workers. They will unhesitatingly split the old unions rather than allow them to become revolutionary mass organizations, while at the same time they will put themselves at the head of mass movements of the workers to wreck them. The T.U.U.L., instead of becoming useless, as Muste and Lovestone say, becomes all the more important as the rallying point for the organization of the great masses of unorganized workers, for those workers who will be split off from the A. F. of L. unions by the reactionary leaders to prevent the workers' carrying out a militant class struggle policy.

Never was the situation so favorable as now to work in the old unions. The opportunity is at hand to build a powerful left wing movement, to win great masses of workers for our program against starvation, against imperialist war and for the defense of the Soviet Union, etc. But this work must be carried out in coordination with the building of the revolutionary T.U.U.L. unions. It must be done with our new methods of work. It must have the aim, not of building a Muste-Lovestone appendage of the A. F. of L. leaders, but of constructing a revolutionary weapon for the destruction of the ultra-reactionary clique.