
THE TECHNIQUE OF THE MASS CAMPAIGN

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[This is the third in Comrade Foster's series of articles on mass organization and struggle. The first two articles, which appeared in the February and April issues, dealt with the urgent need for developing a modernized technique of mass organization and the necessity for humanizing the mass educational work. Others will follow.—The Editors.]

THE rise of fascism and reaction, with their sinister and menacing forms of mass control, are making more and more decisively important the people's technique of mass agitation, organization and struggle. The traditional slipshod, "by-guess-and-by-God" methods of mass work used at present quite generally by the democratic front forces, for the most part unscientific and clumsy, have now been rendered obsolete and positively dangerous. These rule-of-thumb, primitive methods must give way to more modern and effective systems of mass work. As the first big step toward this, the whole organization question must be raised to a higher political level and be more carefully studied. Hitherto the always important but now decisive matter of the people's organization has been given but the loosest and sketchiest treatment. There is only very fragmentary American lit-

erature on the subject, a mere drop in the ocean compared to the huge volume of writings covering every detail of capitalist business organization—finances, management, salesmanship, etc. In the necessary restatement and reshaping of the people's organization methods, the Communist Party, with its superlatively great mass organizers, Lenin and Stalin, as its guides, bears an especially heavy responsibility.

The reexamination of the growing democratic front's theory and practice of mass work must cover the whole scope of agitation, organization and struggle. It should also include a careful study of the new methods employed by our reactionary enemies in all these three branches. And we should be keen to draw all necessary lessons, whether from friends or foes. In this article I am touching upon only one phase of the broad organization question—the matter of mass campaigns.

THE ELEMENTS OF THE MASS CAMPAIGN

Before analyzing the technique proper of the mass campaign, we should fasten clearly in our minds two basic points. The first of these is to realize the political character of contemporary mass organization and struggle. Mass campaigns today are political because their objectives, even

when they bear an economic imprint, almost always have profound political consequences. They are political, furthermore, because their initiation, tempo and course are conditioned by the given political conditions. Thus it is obvious that the struggle of the unemployed under the progressive Roosevelt Administration assumes a much different character than it did under the reactionary Hoover Administration.

Mass campaigns are political also, because their forms are deeply influenced by the political convictions of those controlling them. Thus, fascists develop autocratic forms of mass work based on their reactionary dictatorial conceptions; while the different approaches of the C.I.O. and the A. F. of L. toward the task of organizing the workers of the basic industries are a direct reflection of the difference between the progressive political outlook of the C.I.O. leadership and the reactionary political conceptions of the A. F. of L. heads.

Finally, mass campaigns are political in their very knitting together. Thus, building the democratic front is not merely a question of mechanically hooking together a lot of workers, farmers, and petty-bourgeois organizations; it is a complicated political process, involving a vast amount of political mass education, the development of complex political demands, and the carrying through of many political mass actions. Underestimation of the relation of mass organization to politics is a great source of weakness in the work of trade unions and other popular mass organizations.

The second consideration to be borne in mind in analyzing the technique of the mass campaign is that a mass campaign constitutes an offensive. Let us take a trade union, for example. Normally its struggle consists pretty much of routine activities, such as recruiting, dues collections, settlement of shop grievances, operation of benefit features, and educational work. But when the union faces some special task that calls for a great effort—such as a strike, an organizing drive, or an election struggle—it goes over to the offensive; that is, it launches a mass campaign and reorganizes its forces to further this militant drive.

Right here, in the need of thoroughly concentrating the organization's resources for the offensive, we encounter the most serious of all practical weaknesses in the mass work of the various types of the people's democratic organizations. *This is the widespread inability to pass over definitely from the routine of ordinary day-to-day activities to the special, intensified effort required by the offensive, or mass campaign.* Commonly, this weakness expresses itself by a reliance upon the spontaneity of the masses instead of upon solid educational and organizational work, with the result that the mass campaign acquires only a fraction of its potential strength.

Now, after getting clearly in our minds the elementary facts that mass campaigns are political in character and also that they are militant offensives, we can proceed to a brief statement of the major principles upon which effective mass campaigns are

organized. These may be stated briefly under four heads:

A. *Utilizing the Burning Issue:* This has to do with proceeding organizationally at the strategic moment with the key demands or proposals that will set into effective struggle the broadest possible groups of toilers concerned. It is the matter of striking while the iron is hot; for often, by a few days of prompt action at the right time, results can be easily secured which would otherwise take years of hard work. This principle involves questions of correct estimates of the given economic and political situation, the elaboration of realistic demands, the accurate timing of the movement, boldness of initiative, etc.

B. *A Practical Plan of Action:* This is the question of strategy and tactics. To be effective, a mass campaign requires a well-worked-out plan of action no less than does a military campaign.

C. *A Full Mobilization of Organizing Forces:* This is the task of concentrating to the utmost the strength of the organization concerned—funds, organizers, allies, etc.—for the campaign in prospect.

D. *A Good Execution of the Campaign:* This involves the actual carrying through of the mass campaign, or offensive, the execution of the strategy and tactics, the application of the organization's strength and the realization of the demands of the masses in action.

The extent to which these four principles are correctly applied in a given mass campaign determines the measure of its success or failure. The history of the American class struggle

is rich in mass struggles; let us now see what we can learn from the great ledger of this historical experience, by referring to it in the light of our four principles, one by one.

A. UTILIZING THE BURNING ISSUE

Excellent examples of an effective seizure upon the burning issue, of good political timing, were shown by Roosevelt in the election campaigns of 1932 and 1936, wherein the New Deal program expressed so sharply the urgent needs of the great masses. In consequence these masses responded in overwhelming numbers, even though politically largely unorganized. In view of the present semi-fascist demagogy and militant tactics of the reactionaries, however, the New Deal forces will require a much higher degree of organization to win in 1940 than they did in 1936.

Another fine illustration of a mass campaign effectively fitting into the most urgent needs of the masses was the great 1936-38 organization drives of the C.I.O. This broad movement, with its aims of organizing the unorganized, raising wages, etc., admirably dovetailed with the moods and requirements of the masses and also with the general political situation in the country. It was a golden opportunity well seized.

The big struggles for unemployment insurance and relief, led by the Communist Party from 1930 to 1933, were similarly very timely and well-organized movements; the central issues being of the most burning importance.

So was the Trade Union Educational League amalgamation drive of

1922-24, which sounded a vital note of solidarity just at the moment when the craft-divided labor movement was being fiercely assailed in the post-war offensive of the reactionaries. This amalgamation campaign, carried on by a handful of militants, won the endorsement of over half the A. F. of L. trade unions; it declined for want of a solid organization backing.

The development of the San Francisco General Strike similarly presented a splendid case of expanding the mass struggle in accordance with the developing fighting mood of the masses, the difficulty with this historic struggle, however, being that it was knifed from within by reactionary leaders in key positions. The organizers of the national textile strike of 1914 also showed ability to seize the burning issue among the broad masses of textile workers, but they could not transform their general strike movement into solid organization and struggle, with the result that the strike collapsed. The swift spread of the Townsend movement of 1936 was another clever utilization of the burning issue of old-age pensions; but in this case the movement was in the hands of reactionary demagogues.

As against these instances of capable seizing upon the burning issue, a whole host of failures to achieve this end might be cited. In our class struggle history there have been innumerable instances when the masses, thoroughly aroused and willing to fight, received no leadership, with the result that the opportunities were lost. Let me mention, for example, the Lawrence strike of 1912.

This famous I.W.W. struggle, resulting victoriously, deeply stirred

whole armies of workers in neighboring communities; but the I.W.W., immersed in the local Lawrence situation, neglected to follow up its success there by launching a broad strike movement throughout New England, with the result that soon the far-spread workers' strike fever dissipated itself fruitlessly.

During the great 1929 upheaval among the Southern textile workers the National Textile Workers Union (Trade Union Unity League) made a similarly typical mistake. It did not understand how to take the broad and simple organizational steps required to put itself at the head of the surging movement which involved every Southern textile district, but instead short-sightedly kept its attention so completely focused upon the bitter Gastonia strike that it became isolated from the broader movement.

Or, let us take another instance: during the great national movement of the automobile workers in 1937, growing out of the big General Motors strike, it would have been a relatively simple matter to unionize the Ford workers, who were dead ripe for organization; but the union (probably because of Homer Martin's illicit connections with the Ford Company) neglected to take the A B C steps necessary and so lost this unprecedented opportunity to organize Ford's great plants. Today the problem of doing this organizing job is very much greater.

Many more similar instances could be cited of failure to utilize the burning issue, a current one being the lackadaisical response of the trade unions to the militant lead given by the Roosevelt Administration in the

urgent question of a national health program.

Sometimes the burning issue is not grasped because of organizing ineptitude; at others, it is because of Leftist attempts to raise artificial or too advanced demands; at still others, it is because of deep political reasons, as in the case of the historical failure of the A. F. of L. seriously to set about organizing the workers in the basic industries. This situation long cried out for action; but the A. F. of L. leaders did nothing to remedy it. At almost any time in the past twenty-five years (especially during the World War) they could have organized the mass production industries if they had simply tried, even with their craft forms of organization. This was proved by the fact that, through industrial federations of craft unions led by progressive elements, the meat-packing industry was organized in 1917 and the steel industry in 1919. Behind the failure of the A. F. of L. leaders to organize the basic industries, their refusal to utilize the burning issue in this central case, was a profound political reason, not simply bureaucracy and sluggishness.

These reactionaries did not want the great masses of unskilled and semi-skilled in their unions, since they dreaded the inevitable consequences of a growth of class consciousness among the workers, more progressive political action, a more advanced type of leadership. This illustrates, as Lenin so often pointed out, the organic connection between politics and organization. If the C.I.O. takes a more advanced stand towards the organization of the basic workers than do the A. F. of L. leaders, this is a

manifestation of the fact that it is of a more progressive political character.

B. A PRACTICAL PLAN OF ACTION

To seize upon the burning issue at the strategic moment is the first principle of a successful mass campaign. The second is to develop the campaign along a well-thought-out plan of action. Unless this second condition is met, even the most timely struggles, based upon the most urgent mass demands, will come to naught.

An excellent example of a well-planned mass campaign was the C.I.O. organizing drive in the steel industry, beginning in 1936. The main structure of the C.I.O. plan was the industrial form of unionism and a strong national recruiting campaign carried on simultaneously in every important steel center, both of which measures were well-adapted to the needs of the situation. The 1919 steel campaign was likewise thoroughly planned (despite the sabotage of the A. F. of L. leaders). The first national hunger march of the unemployed to Washington, in December, 1931, represented one of the finest examples of good planning in the history of the American labor movement. The "Save-the-Union" Left-wing United Mine Workers of America movement in the coal industry (1926-29) was a further example of a campaign elaborately planned. Likewise the California Pension Plan (Ham and Eggs movement) has carried on a well-planned campaign, deserving close study.

Such examples of good planning are, however, the exception. For the most part, labor's campaigns are de-

plorably scattered and disjointed. Responsible for this are a whole series of causes, many of them political in character; such as reliance upon mere agitation and upon the spontaneity of the masses; inertia, routinism and inexperience; craft divisions, perfectionist organization schemes and downright betrayals—all of which serve to prevent the toilers from marching forward in full strength in the given struggle. Let a few brief examples illustrate the prevalent weakness in planning mass actions.

Take the great national railroad shopmen's strike of 1922. This historic struggle grew out of a situation in which all categories of railroad workers were under heavy fire from the companies and the Coolidge government. The crying need was for a united front of all the unions, a common strategy and plan of action covering the entire body of railroad workers. The Communist Party and the Trade Union Educational League proposed such a program of action, but the conservative union leaders rejected it. Consequently, some of the unions stayed at work while the rest struck, with the result that they all suffered a heavy defeat. Similar lack of solidarity and planned action has been repeated in hundreds of strikes and organizing campaigns.

A further example is the A. F. of L. traditional political policy—which consists of more or less vague calls (often contradictory) to the workers to support certain candidates, but with no plan of action around which they can organize their forces. For haphazard dabbling and formless working at cross-purposes the conservative trade unions stand at the head of the list.

More progressive movements are often also guilty of such serious faults. Sometimes we find no adoption of a real program of action, but dependence (more or less fruitless) on merely a general agitation of an otherwise correct political line. Another traditional weakness of Left and progressive organizations is that they often go to the opposite extreme of adopting grandiose plans of action which have no real relation to the organization's forces and which, therefore, remain barren of achievement.

C. FULL MOBILIZATION OF THE ORGANIZING FORCES

As we have seen, the first requirement for a successful mass campaign is that it be based upon a burning issue, and the second that it be organized around a realistic and carefully formulated plan of action. But even all this will avail little or nothing unless the organization concerned, overcoming its own inertia and rising above the routine of its daily tasks, makes the best possible mobilization of its resources—raising of funds, assembling and training of organizers, etc.—to carry out the campaign, that is, the offensive, which it is about to undertake. This involves the whole question of concentration. Of course, whether a campaign is to be a long and hard one or just a demonstrative struggle is a vital matter to be taken into consideration.

The very best example in American trade union history of a powerful mobilization of organizing forces was that carried out by the C.I.O. in its big unionizing drive of 1936-38. The C.I.O. leaders, to back up their general plan of action, formed a bloc of unions

with 1,000,000 members to lead in the organizing work, put several hundred organizers in the field, and made available two or three million dollars to finance the campaign. Compare this, for example, with the \$1,400 and half dozen organizers that the A. F. of L. unions provided to start the 1919 steel campaign. Another vital element in the C.I.O. mobilization was that, discountenancing Red-baiting, the leaders drew in all progressive forces as organizers. This splendid mobilization of forces, which was incomparably superior to anything the A. F. of L. had ever done in its whole existence, was the secret of the success of the campaign. In my judgment it was the most important factor in determining the favorable outcome of the campaign.

The old-age pension movements have also displayed considerable ability in mobilizing their forces for action, notably the California Pension Plan movement; their methods deserve more attention from us than they have received. In its several fights against Roosevelt (Supreme Court Bill, government reorganization, etc.), the reactionary Coughlin movement has also shown far greater flexibility and ability to go swiftly into action on a broad scale with a maximum of its forces than have the sprawling, disjointed and cumbersome progressive peace movements.

Enemies of a full mobilization of organizing forces for a given campaign are our old acquaintances—routinism, reliance upon spontaneity, and a general planless approach to the work. Here again the craft unions are the classical offenders. Their history is one long record of dabbling with

organizing campaigns and strikes, planless and without any serious attempt to develop their real strength for the task in hand. One could write a book about their weaknesses in this respect.

A typical example of the failure to throw the full power of the organization into the campaign in hand is to be seen in the way the Martin leadership of the Automobile Workers Union dilly-dallied with the job of organizing the Ford plant. After letting slip the exceptional opportunity to organize this great works during the general wave of automobile workers' strikes, Homer Martin later on from time to time announced that campaigns would be launched to do the job. But nothing came of these "campaigns" except a lot of organizing plans, much newspaper talk, a few scattered meetings, a handbill or two, and some arrests. At no time was the great potential power of the big union mobilized for the work. If it had been, the Ford workers could have been organized readily at any time during the past two years. Deliberate sabotage by Martin explains this failure.

Another glaring example of failing seriously to mobilize the union's forces in a struggle may also be cited from the history of the Automobile Workers Union—during the 1938 gubernatorial election campaign. Although the union had endorsed the candidacy of Governor Murphy, right in the last week of the campaign and just exactly when the union leadership was needed most in Detroit to rally the union forces—the Executive Board pulled up stakes and went to Washington to hold a meeting lasting several days. More Martin sabotage.

To mobilize a movement's forces for a broad and active mass campaign is relatively simple where only one organization is concerned, but it is a highly complex problem where there are involved such loose, decentralized movements as the A. F. of L., Labor's Non-Partisan League, the League for Peace and Democracy, the American Youth Congress, the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, and many similar federated groupings. In such weakly-knitted movements, with the cross current programs and routines of their many affiliates, it takes skill, patience, and all-round good political and organizational work to achieve real concentration of forces for a determined campaign. The extreme weakness in action of these federations emphasizes the need for the systematic centralization of the people's organizations.

Many mistakes are made in seeking to bring about a mobilization of organizing forces for mass struggle. A common error, one to which Left-wing elements have long been victims, is the habit of relatively weak movements straining their resources by holding big, spectacular national conventions, sometimes with two or three thousand delegates, scared up from every nook and cranny. This disease may be called "conventionitis." Such artificially inflated conventions are but flashes in the pan; they are merely pseudo-mobilizations, agitational stunts. No mass struggle follows them, but only exhaustion of the movement. Conventions should be understood not simply as agitational devices, but primarily as means to mobilize the given organization or movement for carrying out the tasks ahead of it.

D. A GOOD EXECUTION OF THE CAMPAIGN

The burning issue, a practical plan of action, a thorough mobilization of the organizing forces, are, as we have seen, basic elements in a mass campaign, or offensive. But they will not avail much if the fourth element, a good execution of the campaign, is not achieved. Thus, a given movement needs not only a sound program, a correct strategy and united forces, but it must also effectively apply these three elements in the actual struggle itself.

The American class struggle provides many examples of well-executed campaigns, both on the industrial and political fields. The famous I.W.W. textile strike of 1912 was a very well executed local campaign. Effective utilization of the small resources in hand also was one of the things that made the 1919 steel struggle so strong. The New York fur workers' and the Passaic textile workers' strikes in 1926 were similarly excellent examples of mass campaigns well carried out. So were the Detroit General Motors C.I.O. automobile strikes of 1937. There is also much in this general respect to be learned from the effective campaigns of the old-time Non-Partisan League in the Dakotas, as well as from the old-age pension movements of today. The two great Roosevelt national election drives were also well conducted. Nor will an alert labor organizer scorn to study even the membership campaigns of fraternal organizations, the sales drives of business men, etc., for these activities have a great deal that is useful to teach us in the principles of organization.

Successes have been many in the general field of organization work we are discussing, and they should be studied carefully. But no less should we learn the lessons from our weaknesses, which are all too plentiful. Among the more prevalent shortcomings in the actual carrying out of mass campaigns the following may be cited:

1. *Incompetent leadership*: Failure or slowness in adapting the strategy and tactics of the campaign to the changing relation of forces and evolving political situations, which leads to serious errors in timing, such as when to advance, when to retreat, or when to bring the movement to a climax. Example, the Left-wing leadership's failure to settle opportunely the New York cloakmakers' strike of July, 1926.

2. *Feeble self-criticism*: Without an objective evaluation of its mistakes and shortcomings, as well as its achievements, no mass campaign can accomplish maximum success. The general and very bad tendency, however, is to ignore mistakes made by leaders and to cover them up by blaming defeats upon the unreadiness of the masses, the too great strength of the opposition, the unripeness of the political situation, and various other handy excuses.

3. *Lack of democracy*: In the great majority of cases, mass campaigns are carried out entirely too much from the top, everything being narrowly controlled by a handful of leaders. This is a great weakness in democratic mass movements. Good organizers, on the contrary, strive by every means to bring about the broadest mass participation in policy-making and execution compatible with centralized

action, since this enormously strengthens the whole movement. Democracy must not, however, lapse into the "rank and filism," or paralyzing decentralization, that we see in some parts of the country, notably in the West.

4. *Sectarianism*: This cramping, narrowing, splitting tendency manifests itself in a variety of harmful ways in this struggle. Example, the practice of trade unions in strikes, election campaigns, etc., ignoring or rejecting cooperation with potentially powerful allies among the farmers and city petty bourgeoisie. It is a deadly enemy. Under sectarian flags we find camping such disruptive elements as Trotskyites and Lovestoneites.

5. *Inadequate discipline*: A general weakness is a lack of discipline in the organizing forces. The center issues instructions, but the field leaders may or may not carry them out, with or without serious modifications. Result, the campaign straggles along unevenly and lamely. One of the basic reasons for the success of the 1919 steel organizing crew was its exceptionally high degree of unity and discipline. Thus, when it came to setting up the many local food commissaries to take care of the relief work for the 365,000 strikers in 80 steel centers, this was accomplished simply by a single conference of the field organizers, plus two detailed letters of instructions. These simple arrangements were enough for the disciplined crew. Not one general organizer had to be sent out from the center to supervise the work. The commissary system, well-organized, was one of the outstanding features of the struggle and attracted national attention.

6. *Abstract mass agitation*: This is the injurious tendency of ignoring or minimizing the human element in mass campaigns, of putting our case too matter-of-factly, of failing to dramatize the struggle. Old-line politicians, with their baby-kissing, hand-shaking and backslapping, realize in a crude way the importance of the human element; and the fascists, who base their activities so largely upon emotional appeals, are acutely aware of it. (See my article in *The Communist*, April, 1939, on this general subject.)

7. *Slowness to adopt new methods of work*: This is notably characteristic of the A. F. of L. craft unions, but is common also in many other mass organizations and campaigns. Use of the radio is especially neglected. The tremendous possibilities of this instrument of mass agitation and struggle are now being all too effectively illustrated by the nefarious activities of Father Coughlin. (See my article "New Methods of Political Mass Organization" in *The Communist*, February, 1939.)

8. *Neglect to build the organization during the struggle*: There has been very much experience with this harmful tendency of failing actually to organize the workers during the heat of the campaign; that is, at precisely the time when they are most responsive and organizable. This weakness is more or less prevalent in mass organizations generally and requires constant attention.

9. *Faulty check-up*: A very common organizational weakness is for the center to issue plans and instructions in a campaign without, however, establishing a thorough check-up to see that

these directives are carried out in practice. This is a grave shortcoming; for a good check-up is fundamental to the successful execution of a mass campaign.

10. *Failure to consolidate the victory*: This is the weakness of not exploiting in full the favorable situation created by a successful campaign, exemplified by failure to push the organization work into fresh fields, neglect to educate the enthusiastic new members, etc. Every good general, whether in the labor movement or in the military sphere, must know how to utilize victory to the full.

11. *Untrained organizing staffs*: In mass organizations the notion seems to prevail that organizers are born fully skilled, or somehow carry on their complicated profession by inspiration, because only in rare instances do they receive adequate training in the complexities of their work. This naturally prevents their effective action in mass campaigns. More adequate training of mass organizers is imperative. The average businessman would not tolerate for a moment in his sales force the gross inefficiency that usually prevails in, for example, trade union organizing staffs. Here is involved the whole question of good cadres.

12. *Carelessness in cleaning out spies and wreckers*: Many a promising mass campaign has come to grief through the destructive work of strategically situated agents of the enemy. American strike struggles and other mass movements are full of such experiences. This danger is emphasized afresh through the present attempt at a split in the Automobile Workers

Union by company-controlled elements. The growth of Trotskyism, Lovestoneism, and various tricky forms of fascist or new-fascist demagoguery (Coughlin, Townsend, etc.), make greater vigilance in this whole matter a prime necessity for successful mass organization and struggle.

13. Expensive methods of work:

Finances are a severe problem in all mass campaigns; hence, the practice of economy is a basic essential to success. Excessive salaries and expense accounts, and other extravagances, evils especially prevalent in the trade unions, definitely diminish the fighting power of the movement in question.

IN CONCLUSION

The foregoing is but an outline of the broad question of the mass campaign. In it there has been indicated the political basis of the mass campaign and its character as an offensive, as well as the four elements of the mass campaign; namely, the burning issue, the plan of action, the mobilization of forces, and the execution of the campaign. From a consideration of the many examples cited of

both good and bad practices with regard to each and all of these elements it would seem to stand out clearly that there is vast room for improvement in all sections of the current mass work of the democratic front forces, both with regard to organization in general and to mass campaigns in particular.

Many great and vital struggles stand before the American masses in the building of a great democratic front that can stem the tide of fascist reaction, in mobilizing the masses for socialism. Of these struggles the most urgent now in prospect is the crucial election campaign of 1940, which in fact has already begun. If the people's forces are to fare well in the critical struggles ahead, especially in view of the new and dangerous mass methods now being used by reaction, they must speedily and drastically improve their own technique of organization and struggle. This can be done only upon the basis of paying far closer attention to organization questions than has hitherto been the case. It is high time that organizational matters receive the scientific attention that is given to political issues.