

---

# NEW METHODS OF POLITICAL MASS ORGANIZATION

BY WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

[*This is the first of three articles by Comrade Foster on the question of mass organization and struggle. The next two will follow in consecutive issues of THE COMMUNIST and will be entitled respectively: "Mass Campaigns," and "The Communist Party and Mass Work."*—The Editors.]

"The strength of the working class is organization. Without organization the mass of the proletariat is nothing. Organized it is all."—*Lenin.*

THE two traditional mass political parties, Democratic and Republican, have during the course of their long existence worked out certain definite organization techniques. In this period of deepening capitalist crisis, however, American monopoly capitalists, heading in the general direction of fascism, are departing from these old organization techniques, and are developing new and more sinister systems of confusing, terrorizing and regimenting the masses. Among these are their ever-growing stranglehold on the press, their increasing radio monopoly, their sit-down strike of big capital and their hypocritical systems of demagoguery.

Without here analyzing at length the new capitalist political mass technique, it is sufficient to state that

manifestly this dangerous development makes it imperative that the forces of democracy, on pain of disaster, must also drastically improve their methods of mass work over those primitive systems inherited from the two old parties. The democratic front—the alliance of workers, farmers and lower middle class—needs to develop a modernized technique of mass organization, corresponding to the new political situation in which it operates.

The need for this organizational improvement is very urgent. Before us stand the 1940 elections, which will doubtless decide whether the United States is to continue and expand its present democratic trend or fall into the hands of the reactionaries, with the consequent looming danger of fascism and war. To confront the coming test of strength the democratic front will have to have not only a sound political program, but also the strongest possible organization. Indeed, in such a close and hard-fought election as 1940 promises to be, the question of organization may well be a decisive one. Time is short and the necessity is pressing.

It is the purpose of this article to point out the general direction that the necessary organizational better-

ments of the democratic forces should take, to indicate what progress is being made in this respect, and to discuss some of the principal organizational problems confronting us.

#### OUR GENERAL ORGANIZATIONAL TASKS

The great job before us is to strengthen and unite the scattered battalions of the democratic front forces. Many of the existing mass organizations—trade unions, farmers' cooperatives, women's organizations, etc.—contain only a fraction of their potential memberships. Moreover, they are only loosely in touch with each other. They need strengthening in every direction and linking up into a solid and active political movement. To do this requires, in addition to practical political programs, effective organization work. And in carrying through this organization work we have to overcome three major obstacles: (a) the widespread political apathy still prevalent among the masses, (b) the demagogy of the reactionaries, and (c) the sabotage of the tory enemies within the ranks of the democratic front forces.

**A. Mass apathy.** That, despite the great mass awakening under the New Deal, there is still a great extent of political apathy and inertia among the masses is indicated by the fact that of the 67,288,952 eligible voters, according to the 1930 census, only 39,816,522 (58 per cent) voted in 1932, and 45,647,117 (67 per cent) in 1936. Even when disfranchised Negroes, unemployed, etc., are discounted, there remain many millions that are politically inactive. Very largely these non-voters are proletarians, farmers and city petty-bourgeois. These millions

are especially exposed to the wiles of reactionaries. Apathy is also indicated by the several millions of workers and farmers who, from traditionalism or political sluggishness, vote for the Republicans.

It is of elementary importance, therefore, to bring these huge masses into active support of the New Deal. Here good organization, as well as correct political policies, is fundamental. Organization literally grips hold of the indifferent, the sluggards, waverers, half-hearted and confused elements and swings them into action. Winning even a small percentage of these inactive ones may be decisive in the elections. This can surely be accomplished by better organization methods.

**B. Reactionary demagogy.** With bad economic conditions prevailing generally and with mass unrest and confusion widespread, there is the acute danger of large masses of toilers being misled by the demagogy of the Republican Party and its stooges, the Coughlins, Townsends, Norman Thomases, etc. The first great steps against this menace are a good political program and an effective agitation in its behalf among the masses. But the masses will not be adequately protected against demagogy until they are actually brought into the various organizations making up the democratic front, or at least drawn closely under their immediate influence. To defeat the Republicans, the democratic front must know how to combat their demagogy. In this connection, to underestimate the importance of solid organization would be fatal.

**C. Sabotage from within.** The question of strengthening the organization

of the democratic front forces within the Democratic Party becomes a serious matter, in view of the firm grip and sabotage of such elements as the conservative A. F. of L. officials, the Southern Bourbons, the Tammany reactionaries, the Hague clique and many similar groups. The warfare of these elements, who are bitterly hostile to the New Deal, will become more acute and dangerous as 1940 approaches. The fate of the New Deal election struggle will depend upon the extent to which these Tories are isolated from the masses who follow the Democratic Party.

#### OLD METHODS AND NEW

In order to cope with these great problems of apathy, demagoguery and sabotage it is necessary to make radical departures from the practices of the two old parties out of which the democratic front is very largely being born. Here let us briefly indicate what some of these changes are.

*Political education.* The two big parties have long based their mass organization upon systems of patronage, "fixing," etc., rather than upon political programs and discussion. Their agitation, besides being anti-working class in character, has always been superficial and demagogic. In the lower units of the parties, the district, ward and precinct organizations, where the "fixing" and "machine" practices rule supreme, there is ordinarily, outside of flurries around election times, virtually no political discussion.

All this should be drastically changed in democratic front political formations. Real political discussion must be—is beginning to be—devel-

oped around the vital needs of the people. Vigorous strides need to be taken towards liquidating political illiteracy among the masses. This educational work should extend down into the lowest units of these democratic front formations. Every ward, club, or branch should be made a center of continuous mass education, carried on with all the modern technique of intense agitation and propaganda.

*Patronage.* The distribution of appointive jobs—municipal, county, state and federal—has always been a central foundation of the old parties' mass mobilization system. Whole groups of voters are clustered about each political job. Big machines are built on this basis, and the two parties are constantly torn with struggles over the rich prizes.

To overcome this evil patronage practice will be a big but necessary task in democratic front political formations. Appointive political jobs will continue for an indefinite time yet, and the way to handle their distribution is for the democratic front party to take firm responsibility, and not to leave them to the personal control of political overlords. More and more in this matter, the principles of political reliability and efficiency, instead of mere machine expediency, must be insisted upon.

*Political fixing.* Political favoritism is another basic practice of conservative Democratic and Republican Party mass organizations. It has innumerable manifestations, such as favoring certain city contractors, facilitating the granting of questionable building permits, interceding for arrested persons, bringing about civil

service promotions, "fixing" automobile tickets, securing naturalization papers and peddling permits, changing birth certificates, effecting promotions in school, having people admitted to city hospitals, getting workers jobs in industries and placing others on relief rolls. All these practices are vote-getting devices and are highly conducive to graft. The whole "fixing" system is extremely important in old party machine-building, with literally hundreds of thousands of people, especially the foreign-born, being affected by them yearly in all big cities. The Tammany, Hague, Kelly-Nash and similar old party organizations have such practices organized to a high degree.

Democratic front political formations must eradicate this pernicious system. Political graft, great and petty, must be stopped. The solution of the problem of political fixing is for the democratic front party to see to it that the various people's mass organizations and the municipal departments in the community work well, not for favored individuals, but for the welfare of the community as a whole. Especially must this be the case with the city welfare services. The new type of political mass organization will succeed, not by disregarding the pleas of the masses for effective service, but by being even more responsive to them than the old party machines have been. Every ward club, as well as higher party unit, will have to be literally a grievance committee of the people. It must stimulate the growth of trade unions and other democratic mass organizations in its locality; it must fight militantly against city official bureaucracy and

make every public service in its locality function effectively for the masses. This is a vital point in mass political organization.

*Vice and crime.* The exploitation of prostitution, gambling and crime generally has long been an important prop of the old party machines. This is closely bound up with ballot-box stuffing, vote-buying and repeating, and other such practices. Democratic front political formations will, of course, have to exclude all such corruption. The democratic front party, nationally and locally, however, must pay close attention to the administration of justice—to see to it that the masses get necessary legal advice, that prison conditions are humane, that the parole system works properly, etc. It must especially take precautions to prevent the growth of juvenile delinquency.

*Social activities.* The old parties understand the political value of cultivating social activities among the masses. Hence, their many ward "chowders," picnics, dances, etc. The democratic front organizations must surpass them by developing social activities on a far greater and better scale. Every ward club should not only be a vital social center itself, but should also see to it that all the playgrounds, sports activities, etc., in its community are raised to the highest possible level of development.

*Finance and organization.* The old parties are also bad mentors on these elementary matters. Their practices of soliciting employers, demanding "kick-backs" from government employees and other dubious methods of money raising need to give way to organized systems of dues-paying, per

capita tax collection, etc. Likewise, the political organizations of the democratic front must take on really a mass character, instead of their present skeleton forms. The committees, from top to bottom, must be made broad and democratic, not mere cliques of political hacks, and the lower units should actually be mass bodies.

The new type mass political organizations that are characteristic of the growing democratic front—such as the American Labor Party, Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, Washington Commonwealth Federation, Labor's Non-Partisan League, progressive sections of the Democratic Party, etc.—are generally developing along the new lines of political work that I have indicated. They are raising the political consciousness of the masses by systematic education, and they are introducing many new methods of activity and organization. They also have changed attitudes towards patronage, "fixing," vice, etc. But they still are afflicted with many hangovers from the bad practices of the two old parties. The whole subject of mass political organization work, therefore, needs very much to be studied carefully in detail—from the ground up—and its practical lessons learned.

#### MASS ORGANIZATION OF THE PEOPLE

To combat political reaction successfully, not only should the democratic front adopt the new methods of work briefly indicated above, but it must also, upon a scale and with a thoroughness quite new in this country, nationally organize the millions

of workers, farmers, professionals, women, youth, Negroes, peace advocates and other democratic population groups. These must be organized around their own specific programs and demands and their solid battalions grouped about the democratic front political formations. The situation today demands that literally the whole toiling people be organized for struggle against militant and powerful reaction.

The New Deal leaders have sensed this new necessity to organize the broadest ranks of the people and they have directly stimulated and encouraged such organization. This is true nationally, as well as in the states and cities. Previous administrations have been at best only tolerant of popular mass organization, when they were not definitely hostile to it. While administrations in the past were alert to exploit existing mass organizations by drawing their conservative top leaders into election committees, etc., they were careful not to facilitate the growth of the trade unions and other people's organizations.

But the Roosevelt administration has followed a policy of stimulating the growth of mass organizations. This important fact lends a distinctive character to the Roosevelt government. Let us cite briefly a few major instances of this general trend.

A. *Labor.* Through Section 7 (a) of the National Recovery Act and later through the Wagner Act, as well as through the operation of various boards and committees, the Roosevelt administration has aided in the organization of great numbers of workers into trade unions. Roosevelt's

recent appeals to the A. F. of L. and C.I.O. to establish trade union unity were also an unprecedented step in the same direction of strengthening the trade unions.

**B. *Farmers.*** Mass organization of the farmers has also been stimulated by the legal recognition and encouragement of marketing cooperatives; by establishing popular referenda to determine marketing quotas of rice, cotton, tobacco, corn and wheat; by authorizing local farmers' committees to regulate land conservation; and by directly organizing medical cooperatives in the West for emergency medical aid for farmers, etc.

**C. *Youth.*** Besides constructing the Youth Administration, New Deal national and state leaders have repeatedly endorsed and participated in the deliberations of such youth movements as the American Youth Congress, American Students Union, World Youth Congress, etc.

**D. *Women.*** Similar encouragement has been given to the mass organization of women, administration leaders having supported the conference of 1935 that created the Joint Committee for Women's Work. Also the Cause and Cure of War Committee, representing millions of women, has had much support from Mrs. Roosevelt and other prominent New Deal figures.

**E. *Negroes.*** The administration policy has also stimulated Negro mass organization. Secretary Ickes spoke at the recent National Negro Congress regional meeting in Baltimore; local New Deal leaders gave active support to the Southern Negro Youth Congress in Richmond, in

February, 1937; Negroes were encouraged to participate in the big recent Southern Human Welfare Conference in Birmingham, etc.

**F. *National groups.*** Increasingly these groups are being brought into New Deal political activity on a mass scale, and thereby are stimulated to growth. A typical example was the big conference of Polish organizations during the recent Murphy election campaign in Michigan.

**G. *Health.*** It was through the administration that the recent National Health Conference was held. It comprised the representatives of many millions of people, and stimulated the vast popular movement around this vital issue.

**H. *Peace.*** The New Deal leaders have also encouraged mass organization around this central question. At the Pan-American Conference in Buenos Aires, President Roosevelt called for the organization of a great people's peace movement in the United States; since then administration figures have actively participated in such broad, popular peace movements as the Committee for Coordinated Peace Efforts.

**I. *The South.*** Roosevelt leaders, national and local, participated in organizing the very popular movement that produced the recent Southern Conference for Human Welfare, which adopted a broad progressive program embracing wide economic, political, cultural and social needs of the Southern masses.

The huge new and vigorous popular movements are full of the greatest political significance in the fight to preserve and expand American

democracy. With utmost skill and energy they should be developed to the maximum degree and extended to the most remote and undeveloped sections of the toiling masses. The organizational and ideological strengthening of the trade unions; the farmers', women's, youth, Negro, national group organizations; old age pension, health, peace, Southern and other people's movements; and their grouping solidly around the political formations of the growing democratic front is a decisive political question. The Roosevelt administration, while definitely favoring such mass movements, cannot be expected to (nor would it be desirable that it should) carry through directly the job of organizing them. That is the task of the masses themselves. The extent to which the latter rise to an understanding of this great work will largely determine whether the forces for progress or of reaction will be victorious in this country.

#### PEOPLE'S LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCES

A broad form of political mass organization of great significance is the people's legislative conference. This type of movement, like the mass organizations we have just been considering, is not, strictly speaking, a novelty, but, also like them, its present broad scope, key role, and deep political content lend it distinctly a character of newness. New Dealers and progressive forces generally are increasingly supporting this new and significant form of organization.

People's legislative conferences, local, state and national, are vitally important because they link together

into broad mass movements around urgent immediate demands the various separate battalions of the toiling masses: trade unions, farmers' organizations, peace societies, church groups, organizations of women, Negroes, youth, small taxpayers, national groups, etc., etc. They build solid mass foundations for the growing democratic front.

People's legislative conferences have recently been held on a state basis in Washington, Tennessee, Montana, Utah and Arkansas, and in a number of cities and Congressional districts. Various others are in preparation. The most important one so far was the big Southern Conference for Human Welfare in Birmingham, Alabama, held in November, composed of outstanding progressive delegates from every state in the South.\* It is also reported that prominent progressive leaders will hold a people's legislative conference on a national scale this year.

The people's legislative conferences are both specific and general. That is, they may be built around either single issues, such as peace, unemployment, health, or housing, or around broad legislative programs. The conference in the South had a program embracing the wide scope of farm tenancy, constitutional rights, labor relations, unemployment, prison reform, credit, housing, health, suffrage, race relations, youth problems, freight rate differentials, etc. As Comrade Gene Dennis stated in

---

\* For an analytical account of this conference the reader is referred to the article by Comrade Rob Hall, in the January, 1939, issue of *The Communist*.—*The Editors*.

his report to the National Committee in December:

"The essential points of the program for such a movement—a democratic front legislative movement for recovery, security, democracy and peace—are, as we have emphasized previously, already set forth in one form or another in the progressive features of the policies of President Roosevelt, in the legislative programs of the state Democratic Party platforms in Washington, California and Michigan; in the legislative program of the C.I.O., many State Federations of Labor, L.N.P.L. and the Workers Alliance; in the programs of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, the Washington Commonwealth Federation, the American Youth Congress, the National Negro Congress and the Southern Human Welfare Conference in a number of peace organizations, such as the American League for Peace and Democracy and the Committee for Concerted Peace Efforts, and are presented in a more rounded out and complete manner in the election platform of our National Committee."

The importance of the people's legislative conferences is manifold. They rouse the political consciousness of the masses and organize them for action; they offer a splendid means for the masses to formulate their political demands and to bring pressure by lobbying, election action, and otherwise, upon the legislatures to enact them and upon officials to enforce them; they are a powerful instrument for strengthening all the mass organizations that go to make up the democratic front and to break down their individual narrownesses. People's legislative conferences are in no sense rivals of or substitutes for the mass party, but are powerful supporters of it by grouping about it the organized armies of the toilers.

In the fight to organize the democratic front, to overcome mass politi-

cal apathy, to immunize the people against reactionary demagoguery, to render ineffective the sabotage of tory enemies from within and thus to defeat the forces of reaction, people's legislative conferences possess vast potentialities. To what extent these possibilities will be realized depends upon the degree to which progressive leaders generally come to understand the vital significance of this new type of political organization and, more concretely, upon the measure that the various conferences, through their permanent committees of action and continuations committees, vigorously extend their work of political education and organization, with every modern device of propaganda and mobilization, throughout the uttermost reaches of the toiling masses.

#### SOME NATIONAL PROBLEMS

In strengthening the growing democratic front forces a number of new and urgent national problems present themselves, of which the following are among the most important:

A. *Increasing the political role of labor.* Organized labor, which is constantly growing more active politically, must become the leading force and very backbone of the democratic front. But in order to do this it is necessary without delay to heal the split between the A. F. of L. and the C.I.O. This break, criminally provoked by the A. F. of L. reactionaries, dangerously weakens the whole cause of democracy in the United States by demoralizing both organized and unorganized workers, and by alienating the farmers and middle class ele-

ments. If the split is not healed by cooperative movements between the two organizations around specific political issues and by eventual amalgamation it may well be the fatal means of handing the country over to reaction in 1940.

Organized labor must also develop much more organization and activity politically. The C.I.O. is leading the way towards this in Labor's Non-Partisan League and, generally, by greater participation of its unions in political action. Especially important in this respect also is the American Labor Party and the technique it uses for mobilizing Labor's forces independently. A further striking example of the new political activity by Labor was the \$500,000 donation of the United Mine Workers of America to the Roosevelt 1936 election fund. Various A. F. of L. unions move more slowly in the same general direction; but there is great need to speed the tempo all along the line. Trade union unity is the key to this question, as well as to the advance of the whole democratic front.

*b. The alliance between the workers and farmers.* This is basic to the political welfare of the people. Reaction uses every means to drive a wedge between the workers and farmers, who are natural political allies. This splitting tactic should be countered by energetic efforts to link these two great bodies of producers in cooperative political action and organization. Roosevelt and Lewis have correctly stressed the necessity for this worker-farmer unity, and the urgency of the political situation imperatively demands it. But a serious obstacle is

the traditional trade union narrowness on this question. The A. F. of L. is most afflicted with this spirit of aloofness towards the farmers, and serious remnants of it are also to be found even in the C.I.O., the A.L.P. and progressive sections of the Democratic Party.

Such dangerous sectarianism should be speedily liquidated and every effort made to bring the workers and farmers together into active working political alliance. The people's legislative conferences constitute a potent means to this end. They should be supplemented by the trade unionists and farmers holding conferences together on local, state and national bases, so that they may become better acquainted with each other's problems, coordinate their programs and liquidate the misunderstandings that the common enemy is so assiduously cultivating between them.

*c. The progressive Congressional bloc:* The basic class realignment that is now going on in the United States reflects itself inside the two great capitalist parties. Reactionary and progressive wings are forming swiftly within both of them, and they are generating sharp internal struggles. Alert to this new situation, the reactionaries, who have their main seat in the Republican Party, are bending all efforts to develop an alliance with the tory Democrats and to split the Democratic Party. The progressives, who have their principal political stronghold in the Democratic Party, are countering this splitting tactic by isolating the reactionaries within (or without) their own party ranks and by developing a practical work-

ing alliance with the nascent progressive wing in the Republican Party. The progressive Democratic-Republican bloc, built around the general objectives of the New Deal, begins to take form, not only in Congress, but also in the various state legislatures and city councils. Struggles around pending legislation in Congress and in the states provide an immediate platform and the people's legislative conferences facilitate the whole development. The extent to which this progressive bloc is developed may be decisive in the 1940 elections and in the Congress that will come out of them.

d. *National coordination of the democratic front political forces.* This necessity constantly becomes more urgent. The measures already indicated above—intensifying the political role of labor, cementing the alliance between the workers and farmers, and building the progressive Congressional bloc—are long steps in the right general direction. But they must be supplemented by get-together movements on a still more inclusive basis, such that will definitely link up in program and action the various political, economic and social mass organizations of the people.

The people's political movement, the democratic front, is now developing mainly through the crystallization of the New Deal forces within the Democratic Party. There is also the progressive current inside the Republican Party, in addition to such independent political formations as the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, the Wisconsin Farmer-Labor Progressive Federation and the American Labor

Party of New York. The great task is to coordinate all these various currents and organizations, so that the whole movement may go forward with ever greater unity and power.

But here the third party danger enters in. This is the tendency to seek short-cuts to the establishment of a great party of toilers. This tactic is much used by demagogues to split and paralyze the people's forces. Fresh in mind is the Coughlin-Townsend-Lemke Union Party attempt to defeat Roosevelt in 1936. And now there is the LaFollette National Progressive Party to threaten the solidarity of the masses. The short-cut third party danger will become more acute with the approach of the 1940 elections, with their complicated political lineups.

The traditional slogan "For a Farmer-Labor Party" is proving historically correct, as the masses are now undoubtedly moving towards the development of a great political combination along these general lines. But this slogan must not be mechanically applied. Its goal cannot be arrived at by the offhand launching of third party movements. At present, as we have seen, the course of the people's political growth goes principally through the consolidation of the New Deal forces within the Democratic Party. Whether this movement will result finally in rejuvenating the Democratic Party into a great party of the people, or culminate in a deep third-party split remains to be determined by future events. In the meantime, however, it is fundamentally necessary to avoid the launching of artificial third parties, which can only

split the people's ranks and play into the hands of reaction.

#### SUMMARY

In the foregoing, I have pointed out the fact that reactionary capitalism has developed new and effective means for enchaining the masses and that this makes it imperative for the democratic front also fundamentally to improve its system of mass organization. I have also indicated the new attitudes necessary towards such questions as political mass education, patronage, political "fixing," vice and crime, and local organizing and election methods. Furthermore, I have pointed out the problems of the mass organization of the people into trade unions, farmers' organizations, etc., and I have touched upon the role of the people's legislative conferences. I have also dealt briefly with such urgent national problems as strengthening Labor's political role, cementing the alliance between the workers and farmers, building a progressive Con-

gressional bloc, and the third-party question. Finally, I have given at least an indication of the progress that is being made in developing the necessary new organization technique by the various forces that go to make up the democratic front.

From all this it is clear that we are witnessing a gradual transformation by the democratic front of the traditional methods and forms of political mass work. But the tempo of development is dangerously slow. The strength of reaction and the readiness with which it grasps at new means to confuse and mislead the masses, render it imperative that the democratic front forces make greater haste in modernizing their own working methods. The whole matter of improving the system of political mass organization should be carefully studied and its lessons applied diligently and with dispatch. In this task the Communist Party, with its Marxian training, militant spirit and wide mass following, bears a great responsibility.

---

"The present general movement throughout the world for the educational rearmament of the Communist Parties, and of the labor movement—the movement to master theory—is not disconnected from the world crisis. It is because the peoples of the world approach another great turning point in history that the working class vanguard, the international Communist movement, taking up the task of leading the popular masses through the threatening storms to victory, looks to its preparedness, examines its equipment, begins systematic rearmament. And our arms for the coming struggles consist first and last of our arsenal of theory, of Marxism-Leninism."—Earl Browder, *Theory As a Guide to Action*.

---