

# THE LEFT AND THE UNIONS: DISCUSSION WITH A READER

By **GEORGE MORRIS**

ON MY schedule of unattended business, is a letter signed "A Worker" from York, Pa., which appeared in the Dec. 24 issue of the Daily Worker, raising some trade union questions in which he concluded with a request that I "straighten" him out if he is "wrong."



I, of course, don't undertake to "straighten" anyone out. Maybe I am the one who needs to be "straightened" out. I certainly don't claim to have all the answers. But I will throw my few cents into any discussion of union problems, as I propose to do in this case.

Our correspondent says he has been a full-time officer in two unions, including a "left union" and has long been active in rank and file movements. He has apparently followed the left and Communist movement and policies closely for years. He suggests the left change its view on "dual unionism" and adds "I am no longer convinced that we should attempt to work within the labor movement as it is now constituted."

He sees no possibility of forcing the labor movement to "take a decent position" by "working within the present framework." He describes the tight bureau-

cracy controlling the unions and says the top leaders will stay in leadership "with the help of the State Department." The writer also belittles the current protest movement in the steel union over the dues raise and assures us that David McDonald will make good his threat to expel the rank and file leaders and "get away with it."

He concludes with the view that "it was not because of our 'mistakes' (as nearly everyone is attributing our failures to these days) that we were unable to upset these bureaucratic henchmen. It was instead because of the objective conditions we faced." And he takes a negative view towards continuing the outlook of "the past ten years" of working "within" and believes the only hope is "helping to build the left-wing union" presumably outside the main stream.

I DON'T think the view of our correspondent that it is useless to work "within" the main stream of labor is shared by many in the left wing today.

But the pessimism, disorientation and loss of perspective expressed by the writer is certainly more prevalent. That is my real concern in writing on this topic.

Our correspondent feels isolated, as many Communists and others in the left feel today. He looks back to years of his own activity in a leading capacity, but is very reluctant to critically examine his own activities (whether on his initiative or at the direction of others). It is easier to

throw the ENTIRE responsibility on "objective conditions" and in the bargain conclude that anyway you can't do a thing in this conservatively-run labor movement.

He reflects an historic tendency in American labor for the left to always try to get around difficulties by steering off into abortive efforts to build "new" organizations and a "new" labor movement. That was the policy of Daniel DeLeon that ended up with his Socialist Labor Party down to a tiny sect. That was the basis of the IWW. That was the basis for some ill-conceived small independent unions largely initiated by Communist-left influence in the late twenties and early thirties.

That was the thinking among many of the leaders of the "left" unions expelled by the CIO in 1949 who made only formal or very weak efforts to resist and possibly avoid expulsion. That remains the thinking among some who neglected later possibilities to return to the main stream.

THE WRITER talks of "ten years" of trying to work within. The truth is that only very recently, especially since the merger, has there been stronger and more consistent effort on the part of progressives to establish their rights and make their contributions within the conservative led unions. The great bulk of the past 10 years, unfortunately, has been a process of shrinking away from the association with great masses of workers and the strong mass base the left developed over the previous 10 years.

The tendency to shrink away in face of difficulties, objective and others, and to seek what looks like a protective shell, is

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very strong. Ironically, many prominent people in our progressive movement who have often strongly warned against the danger of isolation, have themselves succumbed to this tendency or have been blind to it.

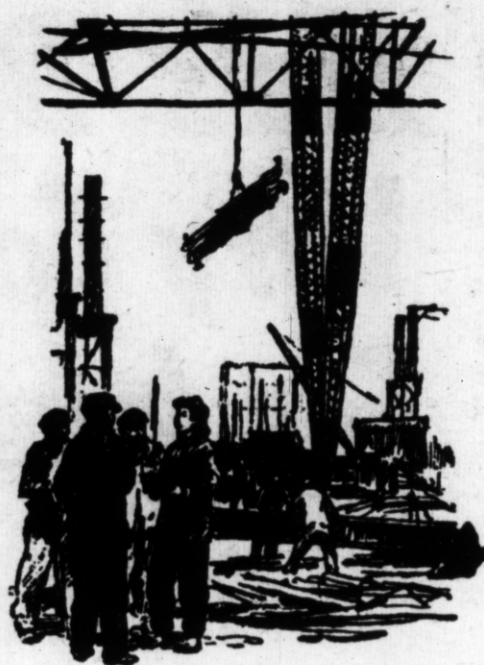
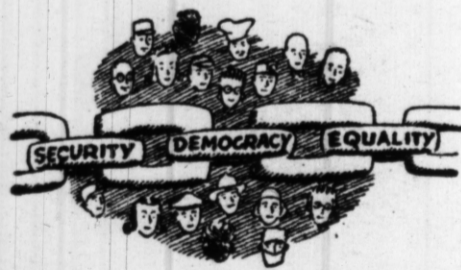
It is also easy to forget the glorious successful experience of the progressives, and what made them possible. The greatest strides forward the left and, consequently the working class, have ever made in America was through a coalition with others on the basis of the key objectives and needs of labor in the period 1936-46. There were people then, too, who were appalled at the idea of having anything to do with men like John L. Lewis, Sidney Hillman, Philip Murray and others like them, or with the then still significant Socialist Party or with the liberals in the New Deal. Many said, as does our correspondent, that it is impossible to do anything "within" the existing labor movement. How wrong they proved to be!

In the years that followed we received the best examples we ever had that the working class makes its greatest strides forward through a coalition of the left and "center" as some call those on the right who in periods waver towards militancy and unity for major constructive objectives. But why the reverse trend after the war so catastrophic for the left?

THE COLD WAR that set in after the hot war, the State Department's influence on the labor leaders, were, of course, a big factor in the change that came after 1946. But progressives are not supposed to be helpless people who take objective conditions, like so much bad weather nothing can be done about.

Looking back, it is clear that America's left, and particularly the Communists who were a big influence in it, failed to recognize the real meaning of the "resent and reject" to "Communist interference" resolution of the CIO convention in 1946. They failed to see in it a warning that a new and more difficult stage was opening for the left; that its coalition with others was seriously endangered; that if its wide base was to be preserved, forms of activities and even the range of the left's objectives, would have to conform to a degree; that those in the extreme right who sought a split must not get extra ammunition to ease their plans.

Unfortunately, for a year before that convention many in the Communist movement were al-



ready "conditioned" for the idea of breaking with the "center" or facilitating such break, by the hysterical swing to the "left" that came with the ouster of Browder and Browderism from the Communist Party.

The party, as many now recognize, threw out the baby with the dirty water. Many saw "Browderism" in many of the positive developments in the period Browder was secretary. The influence of that craze had its worst effects on the left in the trade union movement.

IN MY OPINION, the left began to give up the principle of left-center unity ten years ago. A left-sectarianism has been sapping the lifeblood of progressivism ever since. It would hardly make nice reading to list the long chain of experiences in union after union. It is even less agreeable to note that those to whom progressives look for leadership, closed their eyes to realities or explained everything by "objective" circumstances.

It was much easier to simply pronounce those who disagree with us as "lieutenants of capitalism" or "agents of imperialism" in labor's ranks (a characterization by DeLeon), than to meet the problem of keeping within the main stream. And sectarianism begets even worse isolation and befores the perspective.

A number of progressives even lost a feeling for labor unity and saw something bad in talks for labor unity. Some saw personalities instead of realities. Walter Reuther couldn't possibly do anything good. Wasn't he one of the main leaders for expulsion of the left?

Many in the left seemed puzzled that the UAW became the main center for a fairly advanced program of labor. So they just sneered as it as "phoney" because Reuther is "phoney." On the other hand, many still remembered Lewis of the early thirties and measured him with the 1936 yardstick and always looked to see if the man with the bushy eyebrows will give labor a "new hope."

AT ONE MOMENT in the spring of 1954, there was quite a bit of excitement in some left circles because Lewis, David McDonald and Dave Beck ate

# ON TRIAL IN AFRICA

THE MASS trial of 151 defendants in Johannesburg is based on charges of violating South Africa's "Suppression of Communism Law." Under the sweeping definitions of the law a person commits a crime who any time advocated, advised, defended, or encouraged any of the aims of Communism.

The Communist Party opposes the official South African segregation policy, so that under the Act anyone else who believes in integration could be indicted as a "Communist."

Among the persons facing trial for violating South Africa's law for "suppression of communism" are member of Parliament

lunch together and supposedly agreed to work together. There were some who hastened to predict a "new CIO" was in the making. Complete sight was lost of the fact that the trend of these three has been to the extreme right and that within the 1954 situation their outlook was not constructive but towards still further splitting the unions. We can see today the very conservative role of these three, joined by Maurice Hutcheson of the Carpenters are playing in the labor movement. On the other hand, the forces within the Reuther camp (most of the former CIO) have for some time been pressing for a program that is the most advanced within the labor movement.

It is this refusal or reluctance to see a differentiation in labor's leadership, and among their millions of followers; the failure to recognize that there are strong sections in labor with whom progressives can find common ground and work and struggle cooperatively; that has resulted in the loss of perspective for much of the left. And the situation cannot be reversed unless mistakes are faced and their source examined. Only by such an examination is it possible to recognize the possibilities "within" the main stream.

WE ON OUR PART in the Daily Worker and Worker have worked for some years to bring the left back into the main stream and towards a positive perspective. We have contributed our share of the confusion in the earlier post-war days. But in these days when so many have been taking pot shots at our paper on the Hungarian situation (and with full justification) the reminder is in order that for some years, especially since the Eisenhower administration took over in 1952, and the auto convention that followed some months later, the trade union policy of this paper has been for a shift of the left's face towards the "center," for a revival of the constructive relationship that once conquered America's open-shop centers.

We have worked for the merger in line with that perspective for labor. Today there aren't many in the left who question the policy of working with the "main stream." But many are still pessimistic, like our correspondent, because it is not easy to develop the forms of activity and relations in unions headed by hostile leaders.

But it is far more important to see that rank and file activities are developing in a number of unions on a greater scale than has been evident for some time, and progressives are finding ways to overcome hostility. And it can be expected that following the convention of the Communist Party and a revival of its influence and activity (greatly curtailed by its internal discussion) the work of progressives in the labor movement will reach a still higher level.

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