

The Revolutionary Upsurge and the Struggles of the Unemployed

By I. AMTER

"What is taking place at the present moment is the *transition* to a new round of big clashes between classes and between states, a new round of wars and revolutions . . . Precisely because little time remains before the revolutionary crisis matures, is it necessary, without losing a moment, to *intensify and accelerate our Bolshevik mass work* to win over the majority of the working class, to increase the revolutionary activity of the working class . . . Hence the necessity for really carrying out the task of winning over the majority of the working class—which was put in the forefront at the Tenth and Eleventh Plenums of the E.C.C.I. . . .

"The main link which the Communist Parties must seize upon in solving this problem is the struggle for the everyday economic and political interests of the broad masses, against the increasing poverty, against oppression, violence and terror." (From Thesis of the Twelfth Plenum of the E.C.C.I.)

The Twelfth Plenum of the E. C. C. I. took place in the early part of September. More than four months have passed—and the complete correctness of the thesis and resolutions of the E.C.C.I. must be made clear to every worker. Wars are taking place in two parts of the world—South America and China—and threaten in other parts. The menace of intervention and war against the Soviet Union increases. The impoverishment of the working class, the toiling farmers and petty-bourgeoisie proceeds apace. The necessity of winning the majority of the working class—a task that was set to all the Parties of the Comintern, remains the outstanding task. The Communist International declares categorically that the "main link . . . is the struggle for the everyday economic and political interests of the broad masses."

That the Party is making headway no one can dispute—although we are still far from being at the head of the broad, rapidly radicalizing masses in their struggle. Wage cuts, sweeping in character have taken place in many industries, but our Party and the T. U. U. L. have not been at the head of the struggle against them. The relief of the unemployed has been cut in many localities, so that the workers and their families starve to death, without the Party

and the Unemployed Councils being able to meet these attacks on the workers.

Headway has been made—but it is *totally insufficient*. The prestige of the Party, T. U. U. L. and Unemployed Councils has risen, without our being able to crystalize into organization the sentiment that exists for us.

LESSONS OF THE NATIONAL HUNGER MARCH

The National Hunger March is an illustration. This March was a splendid example of the willingness of the workers to struggle. Preceded by mass struggles in all parts of the country, reaching its broadest and finest expression in the demonstration in Chicago led by the Unemployed Councils against the 50% relief cut, the National Hunger March proves that the Unemployed Councils have the support of wide masses of workers, both actively and passively. Not only were about 300,000 workers involved in the struggles and elections of the marchers, but unestimated hundreds of thousands more greeted them as they passed through the industrial towns from the four corners of the country on the way to Washington. Funds were collected from them in their own cities and on the way to Washington. Workers stopped work to greet them; in Trenton, the doll workers, who recently won a strike and formed a fighting union, declared a stoppage to meet the marchers.

The unions participated in the struggles and elections of the marchers more than ever before, although they are far from performing their full revolutionary duty with respect to the unemployed. Several union leaders participated in the March. The composition of the marchers was good—a large group of Negro workers, men and women, particularly from the South; nearly 1,000 young workers; 285 marine workers. The success of the National Hunger March in achieving its goal and presenting the demands has heightened the prestige of the Unemployed Councils.

The shortcomings of the March are symptomatic of our entire work: a narrow united front, with only a few new A. F. of L. unions involved (although there were about 250 members of the A. F. of L. among the marchers). This takes place despite the rising revolt in the ranks of the A. F. of L., which has compelled the A. F. of L. bureaucrats to reverse their position, *demagogically*, on the question of unemployment insurance—to be sure, not only with no intention of fighting for it, but as has already been shown, of *dropping* it. (William Green has already discarded the demand for unemployment insurance, for which the A. F. of L. convention went on record, in favor of the 30 hour week. In the latter

he has already also dropped the demand for "no reduction in pay", by supporting the Black Bill now before the U. S. Senate commission.) We reached few Socialist and other reformist locals and branches. We made little progress in drawing the other unemployed organizations into the united front and the March.

The crisis is deepening. Nearly 17,000,000 are totally unemployed, and a like number are working part-time, some only one or two days a week, at wages frequently below even the relief standard. Not even the most optimistic capitalist economist predicts an early upturn, although the newspapers have been instructed to write "optimistically." The federal government is trying to balance the national budget, at the expense of the workers and toiling farmers by wage cuts, stagger plan, sales taxes, inflation, farmers' allotment plan at the expense of the worker-consumers. Municipal governments are approaching bankruptcy, this including some of the largest cities. They are cutting wages of government employes, reducing relief, conducting energetic relief campaigns in the shops and factories to collect funds from the workers. While relief to the unemployed in some cities is as low as 1½c a meal per person, and the payroll of the workers is down to 38% of the period 1926-1929; at the same time the profits and dividends of the corporations are 160% of the same period of 1926-1929. A Connecticut economist declares that there is liquid in the banks of this country \$50 against each unemployed worker. When the United States government announced a bond issue of \$265,000,000, at very low interest, more than \$4,000,000,000 was subscribed.

An army estimated at from 200,000 to 2,000,000 homeless youth, girls and boys, is roaming the country, having been driven out of their homes by poverty. Fully 10,000,000 children are suffering from undernourishment. The worst destitution faces the working class, and the capitalists and the government are determined that the costs of the crisis shall not be put on their, the capitalists' shoulders. They are maintaining high profits—while starvation faces the masses.

SOCIAL FASCISTS AND THE UNEMPLOYED

In order to shift the burden, the demagogues are very active. Roosevelt's promises and pledges to the "forgotten man"; the "insurance" schemes of the various governors, A. F. of L., Socialist Party, etc.; the 30 hour a week movement, which is even supported by some manufacturers against their weaker competitors; the "share the work" movement of Teagle, which is the stagger plan of Hoover, and, it is reported, is supported by 67% of the employers (and is correctly styled the "share the poverty" plan); forced labor,

which is increasing; the threat of deportation to militants, which hangs over the heads of hundreds of thousands through the Dies Bill, now before the United States Congress; the increasing terror throughout the country, as manifest during and since the National Hunger March—all mark the determination of the capitalists to shoulder the toiling masses with the burdens of the crisis.

More and more they are using the services of the social fascists and other reformists. The various scrip, barter, self-help and mutual exchange plans, some of which are organized by social fascists for the "training of workers in cooperation", which is supposed to lead to the "new society" or "cooperative commonwealth"; the various reformist unemployed organizations—Unemployed Citizens Leagues (Musteites), Workers Committee on Unemployment (Socialist, Borders), the Irish Independent Political Association, and the Souffri movement among the Negroes in New York—are examples of how the reformists are serving the capitalists in shifting the burden of the crisis to the shoulders of the workers. Finally "Technocracy" comes forward, clothed in mysterious language, promising disaster, on the one hand, and "wonders", on the other. All of them are efforts of the capitalists to overcome the crisis at the expense of the workers.

The Unemployed Councils have not been able to prevent these organizations and movements from enlisting large numbers of workers. Many hungry workers (it is reported that fully 200,000 are embraced in these reformist schemes, which have the full support of the capitalist organizations, and their press, etc.), join them. They attempt to satisfy the immediate demand for food; they present a "peaceful" way out of the crisis; they protect the worker from terror or blacklisting. These illusions must be broken down.

Despite these efforts of the bourgeoisie, the Unemployed Councils enjoy the prestige of being the *only fighting* organization in the United States, meeting with the admiration of the workers everywhere. Nonetheless, the Unemployed Councils comprise only a small fraction of the unemployed and part-time workers. The crisis deepens, the war danger intensifies every day, the threats against the Soviet Union may be turned into reality at any moment—while *sectarianism—isolation from the basic masses, failure to realize the intimate daily contacts with the workers and to carry on daily struggle for their demands, remain our basic shortcomings.*

The Party is conscious of the necessity of unemployed work, of "intensifying our Bolshevik mass work to win over the majority of the working class", but is guilty of crass right opportunism in failing to carry it out in the daily work. The resolution of the Prague Conference on Unemployment in August, 1931, declares:

"The organization of the struggles of the unemployed and the setting up of a close fighting alliance with the factory workers who are threatened with wage cuts are one of the central tasks of the revolutionary trade union movement."

In how many of the red unions do the Communists and revolutionary workers take this seriously? Very few. Some progress has been made in the miners', steel, food and shoe workers' unions. The tremendous unemployment and large part-time schedule make the question of unemployed work, and the linking of unemployed work with factory work, of basic importance. The comrades may not yet have found the proper methods, owing to the capitalist terror, but are carrying on day-to-day work. In the needle union, material results have been gained, with the result that unorganized workers and workers belonging to the A. F. of L. have been drawn into the movement. This has essentially aided in the splendid victories of the left wing in the cloakmakers' locals of the A. F. of L. union. In the marine, auto, railroad and textile industries we have made little or no progress.

ROLE OF UNIONS IN UNEMPLOYED STRUGGLE

In all cases, however, it is still not a *conscious* and *integral* part of the union's work. It is the work of a few comrades who are assigned to the work, which they do not carry on on a broad united front basis. At most it is a committee which carries on the work *for* the workers, instead of mobilizing and organizing them for the struggle.

"The Communist Party," says the Twelfth Plenum Resolution on The Lessons of Economic Strikes and the Struggle of the Unemployed, . . . "must not allow the red trade unions and the red trade union opposition to serve as substitutes for the broad organization of the unemployed."

"The tendency to have these unemployed councils nominated by the Red trade union movement or to subject them to it, must be combatted because it hampers the development of the united front movement. (Prague Resolution).

As yet the work of assigning the unemployed not only to work in the markets, around the factories, etc., but also in the blocks and neighborhoods, has not been initiated, although at their homes, the workers can be mobilized to struggle—against high rents, evictions, etc.

The strike struggles have shown that the unemployed do not scab on the factory workers, but, on the contrary, are most active on the picket line, etc.; nevertheless, it has been most infrequent that workers in the shops have supported the unemployed in their struggles. The Twelfth Plenum Resolution states:

"The Communist Parties and the revolutionary trade union organizations *have not succeeded* in organizing serious mass activity by the *employed workers* in defense of the interests of the unemployed, although it has been possible more and more frequently, to get the unemployed to actively support workers on strike."

The red unions do not aggressively put forward demands for the unemployed, such as no overtime, dismissal wage (or even more vigorous fights against dismissals), the taking on of unemployed workers, unemployed relief for the laid-off workers of the factory from the owner, etc. The question of the shorter work week with no reductions in weekly earnings, must be energetically put forward, with stubborn resistance to speed-up. Factory gate meetings of the unemployed, joint demonstrations, etc., must be arranged. The part-time workers are the best link between the unemployed and the employed workers. These meetings and activities, and the Penny Contribution Tickets, which the Unemployed Councils have introduced (which are to be sold at factory gates, in the neighborhoods, unions, etc.) will be effective means of creating this unity of the employed and unemployed, and of getting contact in the shops for building up the red trade unions.

In the neighborhoods, the work of building block and neighborhood committees and of conducting the unemployed work is still the work of a small number of comrades. There is still the *appointment* of committees and organizers. Unemployed work is still the work of comrades assigned to it, just as they are assigned to a mass organization. In few units is there a grasp of the political importance of neighborhood work, be it factory or unemployed work, and of building organization for the "every-day economic and political interests of the broad masses." Only if we understand and apply with Bolshevik surety the tactic of the united front with all the workers, under the rule of proletarian democracy will we be able to rally the masses to struggle against hunger.

The left wing opposition in the reformist unions is still not equal to the possibilities. The rising revolt against the bureaucrats, and the mass unemployment among the membership, open a vast field for work. The progress in the rank and file movement in the A. F. of L. shows the possibilities. The achievements in the building trades, needle and printers unions of the A. F. of L., based primarily on the issues of unemployment, demonstrate how much can be done. The "left" and right opportunist attitudes to work in the reformist unions must be liquidated. Open struggle against the social fascists and other reformists, with special exposure of the demagoguery of the "left" social fascists, particularly on the issue of unemployment relief and insurance, serve not only to build up the

struggle that can win material gains for the unemployed, but also to strengthen the fight to oust the bureaucrats from position. Joint activities of the Unemployed Councils and A. F. of L. committees must be effected on a local scale.

UNITY OF EMPLOYED AND UNEMPLOYED

Unity is the outstanding desire and need of the workers in the struggle. Just as the bureaucrats are splitting the unions by expelling hundreds of thousands for non-payment of dues and assessments, so too, the reformists, acting for the capitalists and with their assistance, are splitting the ranks of the unemployed. With the growth of the Unemployed Councils and their prestige and influence, there also grow the reformist organizations. Despite the fact that wherever there is a fighting Unemployed Council, the rate of relief is *higher*, the number of unemployed aided is *greater*, the number of evictions is *reduced*—as notably in Chicago—nevertheless the reformist organizations persist.

The Communist and revolutionary workers must be in the *fore-front in the fight for unity*. It is only the Communist and revolutionary organizations that can unite the working class in the struggle. With the deepening of the crisis and the greater poverty facing the workers, there is a real *yearning* of the workers for unity. The Unemployed Councils must propose unity to the workers in the reformist unemployed organizations. In the daily struggle for the immediate needs of the workers, we must propose united front actions, putting forward our proposals, exposing the reformist leaders and their deeds. Thus we will demonstrate to the workers in these organizations that only through our program of mass action can the demands of the working class be realized..

“Communists must fight not in words, but in deeds, for the *united front of the unemployed and the employed workers* on the basis of a joint struggle for social insurance, against forced labor, against the worsening of social insurance conditions, and mass dismissals, and the attraction of the unemployed into the strike struggles of the proletariat. While creating and strengthening extensive organizations of the unemployed, while carrying on a decisive struggle against the replacement of mass unemployed organizations by bureaucratic trade union organs formed by the reformist trade union bureaucracy with aim of splitting the unemployed movement (Germany, England), Communists must at the same time *actively participate* in all the organizations of the unemployed which are formed by the social democrats, fascists, and other counter-revolutionary organizations.” (*Twelfth Plenum Resolution*)

Just as we must build the left wing in the reformist unions, so too we must penetrate the reformist unemployed organizations, to

expose the reformist leaders and win over the rank and file. Through work from within and the united front we will win the workers for the leadership of the Unemployed Councils.

POLICY OF UNITED FRONT

To meet the deepening crisis and the growing moods of the workers to struggle, we must be flexible in the form of the unemployed organization. The basic form is the unemployed committee in the block or neighborhood, in the union, fraternal lodge, in day rooms, markets, flop-houses, Hoovervilles, etc. The workers in the block assemble at the meeting and select militant workers for the block committee, who conduct the work. The block meeting must be called regularly, and comprise *all* the workers in the block, whether unemployed or employed, whether they have registered as supporters of the Unemployed Council or not. The block committee should report on all activities and decisions, which the meeting may reject or modify. Only by the broadest proletarian democracy will the workers be made to feel and understand that it is *their* organization, in which *their* word is decisive—and not an organization given to them by leaders who are superimposed on them. This does not yet prevail in the Unemployed Councils. The result is fluctuation both in supporters and leadership.

However, in certain localities the workers demand firmer organization. We must not oppose this desire, whether it takes the form of a W.I.R. branch, or a club, etc. But the organization must be open to all workers in the block, and must be connected up with the Unemployed Council and participate in its work. If this is not done, it will become a self-contained group, separated from the main stream. Language organization must also be allowed to those foreign-born workers who can conduct their work better in their own language. At all times, however, we must stress the need of the fundamental form of organization and use the branch or club to form block and neighborhood committees. The Unemployed Council has no dues; nevertheless in localities the workers may desire to adopt a dues system. This should not be fought, but systematically be broadened to conform to the general need of the unemployed movement, based upon the broadest united front of all workers.

The block committees, although primarily struggle organizations, must supply the workers with those advantages that accrue through the club. There must be developed *cultural, social, athletic and sport* activities, drawing in the youth and women. Classes, forums, debates should be initiated for the political education of the workers. The block committee must politicalize its work by becoming the center

of all political activities in the block, taking up the local political problems, linking them up with the broader political issues.

The development of cadres is a burning question for the unemployed movement. Thousands of new leaders are needed. This cannot be achieved by working the active workers to death, but allowing them time to study and read. Means of maintaining the active workers must be found. One of the reasons for the growth of the self-help and other reformist organizations, is the question of food and shelter. The Prague Resolution states:

"Collections for the most impoverished can be carried out with the assistance of the W.I.R. and of the cooperatives, and soup kitchens be established for the children of the unemployed. However, *these institutions must not occupy the foremost place in the unemployment movement*; we make use of them so as to mobilize the unemployed for the struggle against the capitalists and against capitalist rule."

This was stated in the Central Committee Resolution on Work Among the Unemployed, in October, 1931. In very few places has this been carried out, out of a fear of opportunist deviations. With the deepening of the crisis and the growing starvation of the masses, as well as the need of providing the active workers with food, this becomes a more important task of the Unemployed Councils.

Simultaneously with the deepening of the crisis and the growing difficulty of the capitalists in solving it even in their way, the terror increases. The instructions to the Illinois national guard not to shoot above the heads of the mob and not use blank bullets, indicates the growing terroristic means to be used against the workers. The shooting of the Negro sharecroppers in Talapoosa County, Ala., the bringing forward of old moss-covered laws to throw the militant workers into jail, indicate the need of workers' defense corps in the unemployed and other movements.

INNER DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT OF CADRES

Commanding and domineering must cease in the revolutionary movement. The appointment of functionaries and committees from outside; the imposition of decisions from above are signs of bureaucracy, which must be combatted and rooted out. Fractions of the Communists and red trade union members must be established in all unemployed organizations, through which the proposals of the Party and T.U.U.L. shall be brought to the workers. *The Party and T.U.U.L. will gain leadership in the unemployed movement only through their correct proposals and the daily work in contact with the masses.*

The penetration of the war industries, and the mobilization of

the unemployed and employed workers for joint struggle are imperative. The spreading war situation in South America and China, and the growing provocations against the Soviet Union, demand action by the workers of the United States. In this action against the imperialists we must not fail to popularize the achievements of the Soviet Union, especially in relation to the liquidation of unemployment and the social insurance system in operation in the Soviet Union.

Our immediate tasks are the broadening of the united front in struggle for unemployment relief and insurance, against evictions, for lower rents etc. Into this united front we must draw the workers of the neighborhood, especially penetrating the Negro and Latin American sections. We must penetrate the reformist trade unions and unemployed organizations. We must be the champions of *unity* of the unemployed movement. We must make the workers understand that which they feel: that *there is no need of more than one unemployed movement in this country, and that we are the champions of unity.*

NEXT STEPS IN UNITED FRONT ACTIVITIES

Our next steps on the basis of the broadest united front of the unemployed and employed workers in the struggle for their burning needs, are:

March 4. On the inauguration of Roosevelt, in every city and town, there must be gigantic demonstrations, surpassing those of March 6, 1930. This is not only possible, but on the basis of struggles in every block, neighborhood and locality, we must build up these demonstrations. Simultaneously in Washington there will take place a meeting of the National Committee of the Unemployed Councils and a conference in preparation for the presentation of demands to Roosevelt. This will necessitate the mobilization of the entire Party, the shop nuclei, the fractions in the trade unions, Unemployed Councils and mass organizations, and through them the revolutionary organizations for carrying on the fight. Out of these struggles must come more trade union and unemployed organization.

Homeless youth and children. These two sections of the working class are worst sufferers. The homeless youth, who are by the police hounded from place to place, are being mobilized by the Young Communist League and Unemployed Councils for regional conferences, to discuss their demands and need for organization, which should result in a national action. The bourgeoisie is trying to corral the homeless youth into military camps to fascicize them and use them against the struggles of the working class. We must fight against this and save and mobilize the youth for the working

class struggle. A nation-wide campaign against child misery has been inaugurated by the Young Pioneers, Unemployed Councils and Workers International Relief. The struggle against child misery is the struggle, in the main, of the parents and adults. It is part of all struggles, but by dramatizing it we can draw new strata into the fight against the destruction of child life.

Building the Communist Party and Y.C.L. in these struggles and leading the masses to higher forms of struggle, fighting against the right danger as the main danger as well as against "left" deviations, will equip us to perform our Bolshevik duty in this period of the end of capitalist stabilization— at a moment of a new round of wars and revolutions. *There is not a moment to lose.*

For additional material on the Twelfth Plenum of the E.C.C.I. don't fail to read the COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL magazine, No. 20, (Vol. IX). Price 10c per copy. Subscription: \$2.00 per year.