

Criticism of Some Methods Used by Block Committees

Purpose of Committees Is to Activize Workers in Struggle Against Effects of Unemployment

By I. AMTER

Block committees—that is, committees of workers living in one block—are applicable only to conditions in the big cities, such as New York and Chicago. The purpose of the block committee is to activate as many workers in the block as possible in the struggle against the effects of unemployment—for relief, against evictions, for food for the children, against discrimination against the Negroes, for unemployment and social insurance, etc.

Function and Task of Block Committee

The block committee is not the basic organization, but the block assembly. The committee is elected by the workers in the block who form the block assembly. The function of the committee is not to carry out the work in the block, but to lead in conducting all the activities decided by the block assembly. Of course, at times, in an emergency, it is necessary for the block committee to make decisions and mobilize the workers in the block for action. But generally speaking, the assembly must be regarded as the decisive body, making all decisions on the broadest democratic basis.

It is one of the basic tasks of the block committee to develop forces—particularly leading forces out of the workers in the block. As the work develops more leaders are needed and they can be obtained only in the block. These workers are the most important, for through the struggle they gain the confidence of the workers, who through their own vote elect them into leadership. The ability they show must be developed. They must be given a training in organization and also politically and be rapidly drawn into the Party.

In smaller localities, the neighborhood should be selected as the basis, the basic organizational unit being the neighborhood assembly. As a rule, a precinct or ward should be selected, since it also has political significance. In such cases, we are able to expose the alderman of the ward, by forcing him to bring forward the needs of the electors of the ward. The workers look to him to represent them in the board of aldermen or city council and quickly become disillusioned when they see his actions.

Wrong Methods

The serious errors that we make in building the block or neighborhood assembly and block or neighborhood committee are: 1. That we do all the talking and make all the proposals, instead of listening to the workers and finding out from them the immediate issues on which they will struggle and how the struggle should be conducted; and 2. That the comrades who are sent into a block or neighborhood to build up the assembly bureaucratically MAKE themselves the block committee and add a few non-Party workers so that it will appear "democratic."

Both these methods are wrong and cannot lead to the development of the block organization. In New York there was a "model" assembly. It consisted of about 60 workers in a thickly populated working class section. In this assembly, there was only one voice to be heard—that of a comrade who went into the block to form organization, who did good work and received the confidence of the workers. But no other workers

came forward—or if they did, they were not to be heard. The block committee conducted some good struggles and built up a general influenza. But today it is not a living force, for the workers could not feel that it was THEIR organization. They did not put into leadership some of the militants who were allowed to develop. The committee is stagnant because the workers did not voice their own demands. We told them their needs, on the basis of general analyses. But issues are issues of action only when they are able to rally the workers to struggle. Let the workers do the most talking. Find out from them what is the immediate need. Then they will struggle. Gaining the Confidence of the Masses

The second fact of appointment of comrades by the section or unit of the Party into leadership of the block committee is the greatest hindrance to the development of our work. The comrades who go into the neighborhoods are generally not known to the workers. Frequently they do not even live in the block or neighborhood. Proclaiming themselves the block committee, the workers naturally feel that this is not an organization of their own, but one that is given to them. The comrades sent into a neighborhood should only constitute an organizing or initiative committee. Their job is to rally the workers on the general demands but more specifically on the demands that the workers raise. The job of these comrades is to get militant workers of the neighborhood elected to the committee, to train them into leadership and thus develop a real block or neighborhood organization. Not only are some of our comrades not fit for leadership, but by bureaucratically putting themselves forward as the leaders, they stifle new leadership and thereby choke the organization itself. The Party cannot make mass leaders; the masses select their own leadership. The duty of Party members is to show through activity, good proposals and proper attitude to the rank and file that they are leaders. Thus they gain the confidence of the masses, who elevate them into leadership.

Stable Forces

Finally the practice of taking out comrades from block work cannot but wreck the organization. The workers see that they have no control of their leaders, who are put in and taken out. This leads to distrust in the organization and it quickly vanishes.

If the Party and Party members would adopt a proper attitude to the workers—talking less and listening more, and not handle them bureaucratically, the block organization would not only grow very rapidly but become a solid basis of proletarian struggle, out of which would come many militants as excellent material for the Party and as leaders of the bitter struggles that face us.