

# Certain Basic Questions Of Our Perspective

By JOHN PEPPER

OUR American party is today engaged in greater struggles of the working class than ever before in its history. The struggle in the needle trades, the new strike wave in the textile industry, and most of all the royal battle of the miners are occupying all the forces, all the resources of the Party. We are facing a peculiar situation. The Communist Party of America is small. Its forces are very limited, and yet there is no economic or political struggle of the working class of America in which the Communist Party does not play the leading role, does not serve as the organizing and driving force.

The American Federation of Labor and its component parts refuse to lead any strike struggles. The Socialist Party in its last convention officially repudiated the very idea of the class struggle. The officialdom of the labor movement sabotages the basic task: the organization of the vast masses of unorganized. The Communist Party, and only the Communist Party, is today the champion of the class struggle of the working class of America. The Communist Party, and only the Communist Party, is today the driving force in all strike movements. The Communist Party, and only the Communist Party, is today the sole conscious organizing force among the millions of unorganized.

Recent articles by Comrade Foster give a clear and thorough-going analysis of the present crisis in the American labor movement. Developments during the last few weeks have proven the correctness of this analysis. We can today maintain that certain contours of the future picture of the American labor movement are beginning to show themselves. The Save-the-Union movement among the miners, the mill committee organizations of the textile workers, and the left-wing organizations of the various needle trades are the first forms of the future methods, organizations, and leadership of the American trade union movement.

New facts, new forms, new phenomena—create the necessity of giving careful consideration to the next perspective facing us and the American labor movement.

The Communist Party of America is in the midst of the biggest battles it has ever had in all its history. The Party as a whole, all of its units, and its entire membership is over-burdened with work. Many party comrades have the feeling that we are engaged in a

struggle beyond our strength. Some comrades are even inclined to feel that the burden laid upon our Party by the present strike struggle and organizing drives is too great, that our Party, numerically weak and in many respects inexperienced, will not be able to hold up under the strain of the fight. There are some tendencies among our ranks to think that the work of our Party is broadening out too extensively, and that there will be a danger of our not being able to build our Party intensively enough.

There is a feeling in some sections of our Party that we are drifting, that we are led by events, carried away by struggles as they occur, that we have no clear conception of the future, that there is a certain lack of perspective. Indeed, it is true that our Party is not able to make its own choice about its own campaigns, but this is inevitable. Not we, but circumstances, conditions, history are making up our order of business. It would be childish to think that any true Communist Party can have a conception, a "plan," which must be carried out irrespective and which should not let itself be disturbed by "unexpected" events, by new struggles which were not foreseen in the "program."

The problems of our immediate perspective can be reduced to two basic questions: the Labor Party issue and the relation of the existing trade-union movement to the problem of the organization of the unorganized. My last article in the April issue of *The Communist* tried to give an answer to the perspective on the Labor Party problem. In this article I shall endeavor to take up the other basic question: that of the relation of the existing trade-union movement to the organization of the unorganized workers.

We must give ourselves a clear account. Is it the historic task of the Communist Party to organize the unorganized? What are the future prospects of the existing trade-union movement? Does the organization of new unions imply the exodus of Communists from the existing trade unions? What is the relation between our work in the reactionary trade unions and the formation of new unions of the unorganized masses? Is it possible to separate our two historic tasks: the penetration of the existing trade unions and the organization of the unorganized workers?

It is all the more necessary to give a definite and clear answer to these questions because there are not only certain doubts and uncertainties in the minds of some of our party members but also a certain lack of understanding of these basic problems of the American party on the part of some of our comrades outside of America. The thesis of the February plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International gives a brief but very clear and satis-

factory answer to these basic problems of our movement. But at the same time such a distinguished and experienced leader of the Red International of Labor Unions as Comrade Losovsky directed a sharp attack on the tactics of the Communist Party of America. Comrade Losovsky, who certainly is one of the best authorities on the international trade-union movement and whose words carry great weight, has made very serious accusations in regard to the trade union tactics of the American party, accusations which can be explained only by a certain lack of knowledge of the facts of the American labor movement and a certain lack of clarity as to the tactical line of the Communist International on the trade-union field.

Comrade Losovsky, in his article in the March 15, 1928 issue of the English edition of the Communist International, accuses the American party of doing nothing but "dance quadrilles continually around the American Federation of Labor and its trade unions and trade union-lets." It is evident that the criticism of Comrade Losovsky is not directed against the American party because he thinks that it is doing too much trade-union work. It is evident, too, that his critical remarks are not directed against the American party because it is dancing quadrilles, such old-fashioned dances, and not the newer fancy dances in vogue like the Charleston or Black Bottom. The indictment by Comrade Losovsky is made against the American party because the American party performs any sort of "dances" at all around the American Federation of Labor. In other words, he accuses the American party of neglecting the organization of the unorganized and of concerning itself too one-sidedly with the struggle to penetrate the organizations of the American Federation of Labor.

In the same article Comrade Losovsky also raises the following question: "What hinders our American comrades from commencing at last the work of organizing the unorganized?" And he answers that question immediately and definitely: "The lack of understanding, the erroneous interpretation of the united-front tactics have hindered the American comrades from tackling this task."

We have to answer: The problem cannot be disposed of in such a simple way. No one in the American party will deny that the Party has many shortcomings, is in many respects inexperienced, and reacts somewhat slowly and reluctantly to new problems, but certainly it would be a very superficial analysis to see the shortcomings of the American party as the only obstacles in carrying out the great historic task of the organization of the unorganized. Any analysis

which endeavors to tackle the problem in a serious way should include an enumeration of at least the following obstacles which hinder us in carrying out the tremendous task of organizing the vast millions of unorganized workers:

1. We are hindered by the fact that capitalism in America is still very strong and is still on its upward grade.
2. We are hindered by the fact that the American working class as a whole is in a privileged position.
3. We are hindered by the fact that America has the broadest, the mightiest stratum of a labor aristocracy.
4. We are hindered by the fact that the proletariat of the basic industries and of the gigantic plants is composed of foreign-born workers talking in three-score different languages.
5. We are hindered by the fact that we have the mightiest government of finance capital, and that this Government oppresses the working class with its troops, police, courts, and tries to crush all labor organizations.
6. We are hindered by the fact that the organized employers are carrying on a nation-wide campaign for the open shop and for company unionism.
7. We are hindered by the fact that the most important sections of the steel, coal, and textile workers are forced to live in company towns in which the bosses own everything—ground, houses, roads, schools, stores, in which the capitalists own the State power directly and have a whole system of their own police and labor spies.
8. We are hindered by the “insignificant” circumstance that the industries in America are trustified from top to bottom. We should not forget that in Europe the trade unions of unskilled workers were organized in a period prior to trustification. In that stage it was easier to organize these workers. In the America of today at a period of the highest development of trustification the resistance, the pressure of the capitalists and their Government is much greater and more effective than in previous periods in other countries.
9. We are hindered by the fact that the Communist Party of America is still weak, not strong enough numerically, that we are forced to take over this great historic task—which we cannot avoid under any circumstances—with very limited, very weak forces.

If Comrade Losovsky raises the question as to what hinders us in the organization of the unorganized, we cannot be satisfied with his sole, simple answer. Even the slightest attempt at a serious analysis should include at least the above-enumerated nine answers.

Is it true that the American party has no clear understanding of the organization of the unorganized? That accusation has no foundation at all. Passaic, the needle trades' struggle, the present textile strike, the mill committee movement, the Save-the-Union movement among the miners—all these movements, which are inseparably linked up with the struggle for the organization of the unorganized—and we have to emphasize again that these are the sole attempts to that end in the American labor movement—show very clearly that the Communists in America are facing these problems boldly, without hesitation, and do not shrink back from the greatness of the task.

The last conference of the Trade Union Educational League took up the problem of the organization of the unorganized in its full extent. The conference adopted a detailed program to this end. The very existence of such a program proves how unfounded the accusations of Comrade Losovsky are. There is no other left-wing trade-union movement within the Red International of Labor Unions which has any systematic program on the organization of the unorganized masses. The program states very clearly that: "*The main task of the Trade Union Educational League is the organization of the unorganized.*" The program shows that the left-wing of the trade-union movement has no illusions about the American Federation of Labor. It states: "*The official leadership of the trade unions will not organize the American workers.*" It is unjustifiable to say, therefore, that the American Communists do nothing but "dance" quadrilles or fox trots around the American Federation of Labor. But the American Communists are not willing to entirely separate the work of the Communists in the existing trade unions from their work in the field of organizing the unorganized.

Comrade Losovsky shows the tendency to separate these two great historic tasks of the Communist parties. Many dangers are inherent in the policy advocated by Comrade Losovsky. First: We must lay the main emphasis today on the organization of the unorganized. But if we do not link up this struggle with our work in the existing trade unions, it would lead to a complete neglect of the work in the American Federation of Labor. Second: The danger would arise that the Communists would not be able to utilize those powerful mass forces which can be organized in the left wing of

the existing trade unions for the great task of organizing the unorganized. A sharp separation of the two fields of work would only result in diminishing the forces available for carrying out the work of organizing the unorganized. It would be a mistake to think that the Communists alone are so strong in America that they could afford the luxury of taking upon themselves the task of organizing the unorganized without utilizing the mass forces of the existing trade unions as auxiliary machinery. Such a separation is wrong. A synthesis is necessary. On the one hand, the Communists must stay in the existing unions, must build the left wing within them; and, on the other hand, they must take the initiative in organizing the unorganized masses. On the one hand, those mass forces which are present in the left wing of the trade unions must be made use of for the organization of the unorganized. On the other hand, it is necessary to co-ordinate in all struggles those mass forces which the newly organized workers represent with the already existing trade unions. Only such a synthesis can result in a true Communist mass strategy.

We must not have any illusions about the American Federation of Labor. Our position must be:

1. There is no chance for the left wing to conquer the American Federation of Labor as a whole.
2. There is no possibility of the left wing conquering the various national and international organizations of the American Federation of Labor.
3. Nevertheless, we must stay in the American Federation of Labor and in the other reactionary labor unions. We cannot desert three million workers. We must organize a powerful left wing within them, not with the perspective of conquering the whole apparatus but with the perspective of securing all possible positions of power for our revolutionary work. We should not view the situation in America as a stationary one but in a dynamic way. We must know that future complications and difficulties for American imperialism will bring about the radicalization of the American working class and that the strategic positions occupied by the Communists will play a very important role in the revolutionary struggles of the future.
4. The main emphasis must be laid at present on our work in the field of the organization of the unorganized masses in

the basic industries. To facilitate the carrying out of this task we must also make use of all the forces of the organized left wing within the American Federation of Labor.

5. We cannot maintain the position that an influx of new masses into the existing unions is entirely out of the question.

The trade unions in America today are reactionary, are more and more mere organizations of the labor aristocracy, are becoming in a growing degree the mere instruments of American imperialism. The past development of the American Federation of Labor has shown the following tendencies: The unions of the American Federation of Labor have gained in membership in periods of prosperity and decreased in periods of economic crisis. The last period of prosperity of 1922-26 was the first period of prosperity in the history of the American Federation of Labor in which the trade-union movement not only did not increase its membership but suffered an actual, very substantial loss. The American Federation of Labor is today almost entirely an organization of certain strata of skilled workers. The unskilled workers have left the American Federation of Labor or were never embraced by its unions. These facts are basic facts. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to refuse to consider any possibility of a new mass development of the American Federation of Labor unions.

History shows us many examples of a mass development of reactionary craft unions of the skilled labor aristocracy. The trade-union movement of Great Britain in the nineties prior to the period of "new unionism" presented a picture of the most reactionary, most narrow craft unionism. It was merely a movement of the skilled elements, was permeated with guild traditions, and politically was part and parcel of the capitalist parties, especially the Liberal Party. The first shakening of the British Empire brought about a basic change in the British trade union movement. The period of "new unionism" commenced, and new millions of unskilled workers streamed into the trade unions. A new trade-union leadership sprang up.

The second example history shows us is the war and post-war period in Germany, Great Britain, America, and other countries. The trade-union movement of the world underwent a change in the direction of a mass upward development. The shattering of capitalist economy and the awakening of the broadest masses brought about by the war drove new, broad masses into the existing trade

unions. The trade unions of Germany doubled their membership. It increased from four to nine millions. Great Britain showed the same picture. Even in America there was a strong upward development of the trade unions. The American Federation of Labor had prior to the war a membership of three millions. The war and post-war period showed a membership of five millions. An analysis of the new membership of the American Federation of Labor and of other labor organizations of that period shows clearly that the new strata of workers coming into the trade unions were recruited from the unskilled, hitherto unorganized sections of the working class. The influx of these genuine proletarian elements into the trade-union movement brought along a militant fighting spirit, resulted in a whole series of big strike struggles. The year 1920 was the turning point. Since then there has been a general numerical decline of the trade-union movement in Germany, Great Britain, and America. What is the basic cause of this? First of all, the temporary and relative stabilization of capitalism, and, linked up with that, the treachery and sabotage of the trade-union bureaucracy.

Our perspective for Europe for the immediate future is the expectation of a general radicalization of the working class and a sharpening of the situation as a whole. Does that mean that the Communists or the left wing should leave the existing trade unions? By no means! It was in 1920, in a period which still showed an upward trend of the revolutionary movements, that Lenin issued the command to fight within the Communist International against tendencies to leave the existing unions and advised the general penetration of the reactionary labor organizations. The perspective of the radicalization of the working class in Europe does not imply the perspective of the decrease in membership of the reactionary trade unions. We must reckon—as at least *one* of the possibilities—with the possibility that the existing trade unions in Germany, Great Britain, and even in America may be able to attract new masses despite their policy of sabotage, despite their reactionary leadership. The leadership of the German, British, and American trade unions was already prior to the war reactionary, became during the war definitely social-imperialistic, and was not at all responsible for the entrance of new masses into the unions during and after the war. The officialdom of the American Federation of Labor struggled continually against the entrance of unskilled, proletarian masses into the unions. The officialdom of the American Federation of Labor with its fossil, craft policies developed a whole

infamous system in its endeavor to prevent the entrance of unskilled masses into the American Federation of Labor organizations. The unskilled masses of steel workers, railroad workers, textile workers, ect., left the trade unions, but it would be wrong to say that these masses left these organizations voluntarily. The suppression tactics of the Government, the open-shop drive of the organized employers, the whole series of bitter strike struggles, the most despicable treachery of the labor bureaucracy were responsible for their exodus.

It is not out of the question—on the contrary, we must reckon with it as *one* of the possibilities—that in the event of new economic and political crises new masses of workers will join the existing unions despite their reactionary character and even against the will and wishes of the reactionary officialdom. We should reckon with three possibilities:

1. An influx of new masses into the American Federation of Labor.
2. Simultaneously possibilities may arise which will give the Communists the opportunity to assume the initiative and help create new mass organizations of the proletariat outside of the American Federation of Labor.
3. The possibility of such a peculiar constellation of forces that the masses will not enter the American Federation of Labor any more and that we and the left-wing forces will have the opportunity of organizing the new masses into new unions.

There are strong possibilities for this third supposition, but it would be wrong to reckon only on this last perspective. We must keep all three possibilities before our eyes, if we do not want to make major mistakes in our trade-union policies.

The Communist Party of America must see clearly its historic task: It must take the initiative in organizing new trade unions, and it is already taking the initiative! But this can be done only if we strengthen simultaneously the left-wing within the American Federation of Labor, if we make use of it as an *auxiliary force* for the organization of the unorganized masses. We have no guarantee for an immediate victory in our present struggles among the miners, textile and needle trade workers. Facing tremendous objective difficulties, and in view of the weakness of our Party, it is possible that our first big attempt at organizing the unorganized on a mass scale will not be a complete success. It is possible that the organizations being created by the Save-the-Union movement among the miners, the mill committee movement of the textile workers, and the left-

wing movement of the needle trades will not be able to embrace very large masses in the first stage of their development. But one may be sure that these new trade-union organizations will be real militant organizations, will be the only fighting factors in their respective industries, and will serve as *organizing centers for future struggles* in the creation of true mass labor organizations.

