

PROBLEMS OF WORK IN MASS ORGANIZATIONS

By Rose Wortis

Comrade Stachel in his report on Party organization at the recent Party Builders Congress raised some very important problems with regard to our work in mass organizations and the need for changing our Party fraction systems.

This problem has been under consideration for some time in the New York State organization. Comrade Stachel's report has only served to stimulate discussion on the readjustment of our work to suit the new situation in which our Party finds itself today in relation to the masses.

Why does this question arise at the present time? What changes have taken place in the mass organization, and in the life and activities of our Party?

The past two years, since the last convention of our Party, have been epoch making years in the history of the American working class and the American people generally. The significant change lies in the fact not only has the trade union movement increased its strength from 3,500,000, mainly among skilled workers and light industries, to an organized force of close to eight million, but that it now embraces large masses of workers in the basic, mass production industries.

This quantitative change has also resulted in a qualitative change. The American trade union movement, which in the past had been considered among the most backward section of the world labor movement, has in the recent period come forward as one of its most advanced and articulate sections. The American Labor movement, for the first time in the history of our country, has emerged as a conscious factor in the political life of the country often playing a determining role on domestic as well as foreign policies.

THE PARTY TODAY

The millions of newly organized workers in the trade unions are closely bound up with community life, and exert their influence on other sections of the population. Surely the progressive stand taken on major issues by many mass organizations, professionals, and middle class, churches, are not unrelated to the progress of the trade union movement, since thousands of trade union members are also members in other organizations.

The conference of the CIO in Atlantic City, and the recent conference in Washington shows that the

immediate program of our Party which for years we advocated as a minority is now accepted by the widest and most decisive sections of the trade union movement; industrial unionism, organization of the unemployed, struggle for the rights of the Negro people, independent political action, unity of workers and farmers, etc. Despite the domination of the reactionaries in the AFL, and mechanical control of conventions, the widespread support for our program among the AFL workers is such that even the reactionary-controlled convention are compelled to record themselves in favor on many points of this program.

Our Party which is in its infancy suffered from many sectarian tendencies has grown from a very small Party, isolated from the mass of the workers to a Party which though still very small as compared to its tasks, is nevertheless becoming rooted among the important sections of the workers, and closely identified in the minds of large sections of the population with the basic needs of the American people.

Our Party is more and more being accepted as an integral part of the broad progressive movement, whose aims and objectives are in harmony with the immediate program of our Party.

REAJUSTING METHODS

Surely these important changes in the life and struggles of the American people, and the changed position of our Party in relation to the masses, the complete unity of our Party on all questions of policy and the higher political level of the Party membership, require some readjustments in our methods of functioning among the masses. When our Party was small, when in the main we were working in an extremely hostile atmosphere, when the workers influenced by the reactionary forces considered our program foreign to their needs, it was necessary for our Party to function in these mass organizations through a system of Party fractions. These fractions in the first place served to gather and organize our forces to help them crystallize realistic trade union programs, and give our comrades an understanding of the various forces at work and their relation to these forces. It gave us the advantage of the organized strength of numbers, to help keep our Party and the progressive forces from being dispersed in the period when the

Communists in the trade unions were persecuted, expelled, and often driven out of their trades for advocating progressive policies which are so popular today.

With the upsurge of the trade union movement during the years of 1933-34 when masses of new workers began to flow into the trade unions, inexperienced in trade union work, our Party fractions, consisting of more experienced comrades, steeled in struggle, gave guidance and leadership to many of these workers. In our efforts to meet this situation and fulfill our responsibilities, we found that even the fraction which met at long intervals did not fully meet the situation. Many of our trade union comrades, in contact with large numbers of workers, in their shops and unions belonged to Party branches in the neighborhoods where their activities had no relation to the masses among whom they were working in the shops. Our streets unit offered no real guidance to the individual members.

How to cope with the problems, and how to carry on their work in the trade unions? This new situation necessitated the organization of industrial units. Despite all the shortcomings of our industrial units, despite their insufficient political life and activity, there is no doubt that even in their imperfect form they served a very useful purpose. They helped to gather and consolidate thousands of scattered Party forces in the trade unions, and compelled our comrades to think of the Party work in terms of the masses closest to them.

As a result of the work of our industrial units, and fractions, the strength and influence of the Party in the unions has increased considerably. However, these forms of organization, and methods of work no longer meet the present situation. In order to illustrate my point, and to show why our fraction has to be changed, I want to cite some examples both as they relate to the fraction and the politically weak industrial units, since many of these units, unfortunately, still function more like fractions than basic Party organizations.

Let us take the furriers fraction as an example, which undoubtedly will apply to many other fractions. In this union, there are Communists in the leadership, though the actual number of Party members among the furriers is far too few. In this union, as well as in many others, we work together with other

elements, including the right wing Socialists. The union is a progressive and democratic organization in the full sense of the word.

Can we advance the cause of the workers, and our Party, by getting together a few hundred Communists in a fraction meeting to discuss union policy, when the main line of the union is a progressive line which we fully support? On the contrary, such meetings can only result in difficulties and friction with non-Party workers, for we cannot call meetings of several hundred Communists, make decisions, enforce Communist discipline in the carrying out of these decisions, without giving the other workers who constitute the united front a feeling that we are unduly influencing the union through mechanical control. In addition, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity of learning from the masses, and shaping our policies on the basis of the views and opinions of non-Party workers, expressed through the regular channels of the union. Such methods of work incorrectly assume that we Communists have all the wisdom and have nothing to learn from the masses, an attitude against which Comrade Browder warned us time and again.

THE DRESSMAKERS

Have we so little faith in the correctness of the policies of our Party that we need have any hesitancy in deciding concrete problems on the basis of the democratic discussion, in a democratic organization? Have we so little faith in our ability to convince the rest of the workers on the basis of arguments that we need make advance decisions? Surely we cannot compare the present situation in the furriers' union, and apply the same methods of fighting for our policies, as we did through the years when we were faced with suspensions and expulsions, from the unions, and were fighting to defend our rights to be members of the union on the same basis with all other workers.

Let us take another example: the dressmakers, where we were working in a union controlled by Lovestonettes. As a result of the militancy and the pressure of the rank and file, the leadership of Local 22 is committed to a progressive policy on many questions facing this union as well as on general trade union issues. Our problem in this union is to see that the leadership executes the program agreed upon

—a more militant policy of enforcing the union agreement, the adoption of a more progressive stand on general trade union and political issues.

Do we need general fractions of 600 to 700 comrades among the dressmakers to discuss these matters?

THE PROPOSALS

It appears to me that a solution of these problems is not at fraction meetings, but in better work in the shops and unions. It appears to me that such meetings, where comrades come together to discuss matters which can very well be and must be discussed at shop and union meetings, often serve as a substitute for the struggle to have regular union meetings and union channels for discussion, and solution of these problems.

What we need among the dressmakers, as well as among our comrades in many other unions is a more thorough discussion through regular Party channels, units, sections, forums, Party Press, of the general policies of the Party in their application to the particular union. What we need is better education of our Party comrades to understand the policies of our Party in the specific union, their tasks and responsibilities, as well as the policy of the Party on collective security, democratic front, and the ultimate program of our Party, so that our comrades, understanding these policies, can really function as the vanguard of the workers. The experiences in some of our units in Section 2 are already showing that this is a correct approach to the problem. This does not exclude the possibility of calling our comrades to a special meeting, should any emergency arise. However, this should be the exception, not the rule.

I want to summarize the concrete changes we propose:

1. That we do away with general fraction meetings.
2. On the basis of the general policy of the party, we go in to the unions and try to win the membership to our point of view.
3. That the leading comrades in every union consult with one another on problems that may arise in the day to day work.
4. That all discussion on basic party policy be discussed by our Party through regular Party channels, and Party press, and also encourage non-Party members to participate in such discussion.