

The Auto Settlement and the General Labor Situation

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Boom conditions continue to predominate nationally. Based primarily on war production, the boom is in no sense a reflection of fundamental capitalist health. Social crisis is bound to come from the war-depression contradictions of capitalism. The labor movement will then take a qualitative leap forward and great new political opportunities will open for us.

But the decisive conjunctual fact is that boom conditions now prevail. There is a high level of employment, despite some serious trouble spots. Vast profits enable the capitalists to make concessions to the workers. These factors help to maintain a relative social equilibrium in the country.

The present round of union contract settlements has several effects. The capitalist concessions strengthen conservatism in the unions and serve to reinforce the dictatorial control of the bureaucrats. The contract settlements blunt membership pressure for union action. In general the workers will accept a slow tempo of contract gains if progress is shown. They begin to turn militant, radical only when their living standards and working conditions are becoming seriously threatened and undermined.

Revolutionists in the unions remain highly vulnerable to bureaucratic attack. It is true that recent events open new propaganda possibilities in preparation for the future, but our activity must remain confined to essentially propaganda work. The time for agitation leading to mass action has not yet arrived. We can't influence the general masses until objective conditions ripen.

Labor on Defensive

The fact is that the whole labor movement is largely on the defensive today. The Taft-Hartley Act has restricted the growth and curbed the economic power of the unions. "Right-to-Work" laws in the states have deepened and extended the anti-labor assault. There has been recent talk of using the Humphrey-Butler law against unions. A federal grand jury has just indicted the UAW for financing a political broadcast over TV.

Strikes in recent years have been generally defensive in character. They arise from such causes as: attacks on wages, conditions (New England textile strike); runaway shops (ASR, Yonkers); union-busting attacks (Square D, Cleveland); stiffening speedup (wildcats); refusal to recognize elementary union rights (Southern strikes); resistance to modest union demands (auto, steel, copper strikes).

These strikes are not a sign of general mass eagerness to do battle. They are provoked by corporation arrogance arising from such factors as the cushion of unemployed, tax write-off of strike losses, the whetting of corporation appetites by union concessions and the general atmosphere of conservatism.

Once a strike gets underway, however, the workers have tended to show unusual militancy, especially the younger workers, minorities and women workers. There are good reasons for this militancy shown by the workers once they are in action. Speedup pressures, unsettled grievances, victimizations of protesting workers and fear of unemployment because of automation feed membership sentiment for union action. Discrimination against minority peoples and women workers in industry have multiplied membership grievances. The worker inmates of the open-shop prison in the South are determined to win union protection and put an end to the wage differential.

The Southern workers fought bitterly against old-fashioned strikebreaking, going up against scabs, injunctions, fines, jailings, clubbing and murder of pickets. Their battles were much akin to the 1934 strikes in terms of militancy and as a portent of coming struggles. The picket lines of the striking unions stood firm in a solidarity that helped to weaken the Jim Crow divisions among the workers. Several sympathy demonstrations and strikes were launched by other unions. Women's auxiliaries were organized in support of the striking unions. A student demonstration occurred in solidarity with at least one strike. General middle class support developed.

The Southern settlements to date have registered clear-cut union victories. Among the results are: firmer union recognition, reinstatement of strikers, wage gains, fringe benefits, better working conditions, improved grievance procedures. Above all the workers have gained a new consciousness of their power.

The Southern strikers got little aid from the top brass of the union movement. The bureaucrats were generally for the strikers, if they could win by themselves, but the officialdom was afraid to risk a clash with the Dixiecrats on the eve of the 1956 elections. David J. McDonald broke a sympathy strike of steel workers at Birmingham called to protest police brutality against railroad and telephone pickets. His fink role was in full conformity with the general line of the union bureaucracy.

Policy of Bureaucracy

The policy of the top officialdom is based on the idea of a permanent war economy. They count on war production to prevent a deep unemployment crisis and they hope for concessions from the capitalists as a reward for support of the war program. They put emphasis on a prudent policy of social reforms. Reuther repeatedly stressed the "reasonableness" of his GAW demand.

The official line at the union level can be described about as follows: Shape the contract demands not as basically required to meet the workers' needs but according to what the capitalists may give without a serious struggle. When strikes occur keep them from spreading and get them stopped as quickly as possible. Police the union contracts to demonstrate "labor statesmanship." Use the capitalist witch hunt and resort to strikebreaking as a means to purge opponents from the unions.

The official line at political level is predicated on a campaign to put the Democrats in power in 1956. Then depend on the Democrats to soften the anti-labor laws and put through some New Deal-type social legislation.

The drive toward this political goal is the primary reason for AFL-CIO merger. Since adoption of the Taft-Hartley law the AFL has moved steadily toward all-out support to the Democrats. The AFL heads have learned from the CIO officials how to keep PAC-type political action within two-party limits. They begin to see the necessity of Reuther's brand of social demagogy and its value in implementing class-collaborationist aims.

At present the masses are highly susceptible to such class-collaborationist demagogy. The union ranks tend to feel that the merger itself will greatly strengthen labor, apart from questions of program. The workers have illusions that they can defend their interests through the Democratic party. They welcome war production as a means to maintain their jobs. They tend to be appeased by the present relatively high level of employment and by the capitalist concessions made under union pressure.

Events in Auto

These general factors are reflected concretely in the recent auto settlement. The UAW contracts came up for renewal after 5 years of stiffening speedup, loss of job control, attacks on union democracy. The workers had experienced the shock of the 1953-54 economic slump which caused considerable unemployment in auto. They faced the threat of creeping unemployment from the full-scale automation race getting under way in the industry.

The attitude of the UAW membership was generally revealed by the delegates at the Cleveland convention last spring. They desired an effective program to combat the unemployment threat but many doubted that Reuther's GAW would give them any real protection. Some manifested a fear that he would scuttle other demands as a means to get his GAW proposition across. The workers wanted action against the speedup and union protection from victimizations. Negro delegates protested the slowness in carrying out the UAW civil rights policy. Women delegates fought scissor-bill attacks on their right to jobs. Mounting resentment was shown against the bureaucratization of the UAW. At the convention there was one staff member for every five delegates, reflecting the growing gap between the officialdom and the membership.

The delegates made Stellato a symbol of the growing opposition to Reuther. He is the only nationally known figure not a part of the Reuther machine. He fought off a Reuther purge attack in 1952 and pushed the 30-40 demand at the 1953 convention. As an independent candidate for the International Executive Board at this year's convention, Stellato got 30% of the votes, a significant figure. But his vote was not a clear test of cohesive opposition to Reuther. He made no basic challenge of Reuther's policies and methods. In fact he suspended the fight for 30-40 on Reuther's promise that it would follow the winning of the GAW demand.

The balance sheet showed Reuther had complete control at the convention. There was no real challenge to his leadership, no sign of an opposition grouping moving toward class-struggle policies.

Reuther's GAW turned out to be a semi-annual jobless benefits supplement. It doesn't start for a year. It doesn't safeguard a single job. At best it provides less than two-thirds the normal take-home pay. The table of supplementary payments is loaded against the low-seniority workers who need protection the most. The supplement can be blocked by state laws. The corporations are not responsible beyond the trust funds still to be accumulated.

Some important demands were sold short or scuttled by Reuther. New production speeds set by management must still be met while under union protest. There was no significant improvement in grievance machinery. The same old no-strike policy still prevails. All this is tied down in a three-year contract.

Local Strikes

These circumstances led to a wave of local strikes throughout Ford and GM. These actions were mainly brief protest demonstrations against the general settlement. However, these manifestations showed a significant advance over the generally passive acceptance of the 1950 contract.

Some local strikes became more serious struggles over key local issues. These actions were marked by evasion or open defiance of Reuther's back-to-work orders. Younger workers, minorities, women workers were generally in the vanguard of these fights. Local demands included: general wage increases; abolition of discriminatory wage differentials; seniority issues; health and safety problems; more relief periods of longer duration; settlement of long-standing grievances; rehiring of fired workers.

These locals struck while the iron was hot, at a moment when the company was granting some concessions and Reuther's police apparatus was off balance. They won some local concessions, helping to prove that Reuther could have got more if he had fought

harder. This indicated to the workers what a more militant union leadership could do.

Stellato backed the Reuther settlement and many Rouge workers booed him. His case is typical of an opportunist who goes as he thinks the wind blows. He seemed to be so much affected by the main current of conservatism that he was unable to assess the subcurrents of militancy. It does not appear that Stellato could have defeated the Reuther settlement but a fighting opposition would have won new forces through a differentiation from Reuther.

Stellato's case shows the fatal flaw in lack of class principles and reveals the dangers to us in any bloc with such types in these times. We would be left out on a limb, prime targets for victimization. No realistic basis exists for us to make any kind of blocs at the present time. Blocs within the unions will become possible for us only in a period of definite upsurge, only when significant forces begin to move toward a class-struggle line.

The conflict in auto does not mark the beginning of a mass upsurge. It reveals frustration, discontent with the leadership policies, signs of militancy despite the general atmosphere of conservatism. But the brief clash was only a transitory flare-up. It was not a sign of spreading mass revolt. The Reuther machine remains firmly entrenched in the UAW. The settlement has been accepted by a decisive majority of the membership. Virtually all those who opposed the settlement still support Reuther's pro-Democratic political line.

The revolutionists in the union remain highly vulnerable to bureaucratic attack. No basis whatever exists for us to push for mass action in any form. We can move only in tune with the workers' will to struggle and even then only in conformity with the limitations as well as the possibilities of the given situation. Our key task is to introduce the element of revolutionary consciousness into the instinctive striving of the masses, to help them shed their class-collaborationist illusions and acquire class-struggle concepts. It is a complex task, especially under present-day conditions.

Balanced Propaganda

A worker was recently overheard describing the paper as "The paper that's against everything." This should not be too surprising since we seek to inject a class-struggle policy into a class-collaborationist mass movement. Consequently there is little we can support uncritically and much we must be against. But we strive consciously to avoid the impression we are "against everything." In general we should try to counterbalance what we are against by what we are for.

We should credit and support the union bureaucracy as against the class enemy where such may be due in specific cases. Favorable statements, policies, acts from within the bureaucracy should be used as a point of departure for the projection of our program. When we attack the class-collaborationist treachery of the bureaucracy, we should perceive the key frictions between the membership and the bureaucracy and wherever possible use these frictions as an opening wedge for the attack on the official line. Such a course helps us solidarize ourselves with the best militants in ranks.

Here are some examples of a two-sided projection of the things we are for and against: We support all class-struggle demands and patiently explain why these demands should be carried further; within that framework we attack the policy of the bureaucracy. We favor fringe benefits but we oppose the sacrificing of basic demands to settle unnecessarily for mere fringe gains. We support strikes unconditionally but we criticize faulty strike policy. We recognize the need to make realistic strike settlements but we attack ineptness, treachery. We fight for union democracy, against bureaucratic control; for local autonomy, against International union dictatorship.

We must also oppose some policies that militant workers support. This circumstance arises from the contradiction between the workers objective needs and their class-collaborationist illusions. It puts us in the position of supporting the workers' instinctive strivings but opposing some of their ideas of how to achieve their aims.

We are for class struggle policies at both the union and political levels and against all class-collaborationism, whether practiced by the bureaucrats or the workers. We are for independent political action on a class struggle plane and against the workers' idea they can solve their problems through the Democratic party, which is a critical flaw in the thinking of otherwise good militants in the unions. We are for racial equality, against racial prejudice; for sexual equality, against sexual prejudice. To some workers this opposition to their illusions and prejudices gives rise to a feeling we are "against everything."

In any case it is our fundamental duty to tell the class truth. We cannot help foster illusions or cater to prejudices. We present our political analysis and transitional program as skillfully as we can, seeking to reach the workers at their present level of consciousness and lead them toward a class struggle policy. We do not scold the workers for their wrong policies. We aim our fire instead at the class-collaborationist union officials who miseducate and mislead the workers. We do so, not in the hope we can reform these misleaders but as a means to educate the workers and win their support for a class-struggle program and leadership.

Some Key Issues

My concluding remarks will focus on our transitional approach to three key issues: speedup, unemployment and political action.

As a start toward further collective thinking about the speedup problem let us consider the following possible demand: Control of production speeds by majority vote of the workers involved. We would, of course, put full stress on the need for union action to realize such a demand, but there is some room for doubt that a simple demand for "union control of production speeds" would be best at this time. To a great extent the union officialdom is today functioning as a speedup police for the company. Projection of a "union control" demand might, therefore, imply to many workers the continuation of the present hateful bureaucratic policy on the speedup. "Workers control," therefore, seems a preferable formulation at present, even though it leaves the question of the union role somewhat abstract.

The suggested demand implies a shift from the class-collaborationist concept of company authority to a class struggle defense of the workers' rights and interests. The idea of a majority vote should seem reasonable to most workers. It is in keeping with the fundamental principles of democracy. It would help to emphasize the present veto power of capitalist private property over the will of the majority. A majority won't "take liberties that spoil things for everybody;" therefore, that argument also can easily be met.

An intermediate demand might also be projected, such as: provide more rest periods and make them longer. A practical way to do this would be simply to provide more relief workers. Such a provision would also help a bit to combat unemployment.

The relief demand would be aimed toward moderation of the present reality. It appears to have been raised by some locals in the Ford and GM strikes. It would help to generate resistance to company control of production speeds and would point toward the objective of workers' control.

If these or similar ideas should catch on among the workers, let them germinate naturally. Don't try to rush things. The bureaucracy is armed with specific contract provisions on production speeds and it exercises a vicious police power over the unions. It would be easy to stumble into victimizations.

30-40 and the GAW

With reference to the unemployment problem, the 30-40 demand is a simple and obviously effective idea. The workers would fight hard for it as an official demand. The corporation profiteers would just as fiercely resist it. Therefore, the demand serves to project a dynamic class-struggle issue.

There is no contradiction between 30-40 and a valid GAW concept. These should be linked together as a particular and a general demand, with the GAW elevated to the level of a sociological issue: the right of all to full economic security.

To assure a guaranteed annual income three specific demands could be combined:

1. Reduce the hours of work with no reduction in take-home pay.
2. Government operation under workers control of all production facilities made idle by decentralization, mergers, runaways, production cutbacks.
3. Jobless benefits at full union rates for the entire period of unemployment.

These demands would help to cope with the unemployment problem caused by automation but the full problem goes much deeper. Comrade Robins made some good points in his articles on the subject: In the final analysis the only solution of the automation problem will be found at the political level. Automation goes beyond worker-capitalist relations in any one corporation or industry. It concerns the whole working class in its relation to the entire capitalist productive system. The powers of government are required to protect the workers interests. These thoughts should be further developed and concretized in our collective work on the automation question.

In a similar vein, other concrete factors can be used to advance political thought among the workers. Many common class problems require action by the workers. Yet only part of the workers gain from a union contract. Unions in economically depressed industries are in a generally poor position to fight at the union level. The workers' gains are largely subverted by the anti-union policies of the capitalist government. None of the basic problems of labor can be solved at union level. The workers must, therefore, act politically to defend their class interests.

Some of these facts the workers are beginning to understand. Their key error lies in their support of the Democratic party, in the notion they can turn a capitalist party into a labor instrument.

Our task is to help the workers learn the lessons of their experiences, to help them generalize their class needs into a broad political program. We must explain over and over again why they must break with the Democratic party and organize an independent labor party based on the unions. We must help them become fully aware of the potential allies who will rally around a labor party. We should explain to them how a labor party in power could advance the workers' interests.

Later on, when objective conditions take a more favorable turn, we can move toward direct leadership of the mass movement and agitate for mass action aimed in the direction of labor to power. But that still remains the music of the future.

Today our central objective is to propagandize, educate and convince the workers. Our every effort should be pointed toward deepening the political education of workers who are showing some responsiveness to class struggle policies. Our aim must be to bring these workers toward and into the party, to patiently build party fractions in the mass movement in preparation for tomorrow's great class struggles.

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