
Political Activity in the Trade Unions.

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The lack of a working class political viewpoint apparent in the American trade union movement, to say nothing of revolutionary vision and tactics, is a source of great concern to everyone who realizes the important part the trade unions must play in the tremendous changes that are taking place in the capitalist world.

Disgusted with the reactionary character of official trade union policies, the belief has gained ground among the revolutionary elements that the American trade union movement is generally anti-political, and that where it is not, its activities serve only to strengthen the hold of the capitalist class on industry and government.

Two Points.

In this article, I want to prove two things. First, that the American trade union movement, as represented by the American Federation of Labor, instead of being anti-political, or even non-political, conducts intensive and very complicated political activities.

Second, that, while judged by revolutionary standards, these activities are either of a mild reformist or positively reactionary nature, they are not entirely the result of the conspiratorial machinations of evil geniuses in the form of trade union bureaucrats, but are also conditioned by the social, economic, and political milieu, in which the trade unions have developed.

Early Political Thinking.

The earliest protest movements of which American history advises us, conducted by the feeble trade unions of that day, were against executive and judicial tyranny, and took on a political form. The right first to combine for protection and then to strike was gained by the early unions only through political agitation and action, as McMaster clearly shows.

The campaign for free and compulsory education resulting in the establishment of our public school system was an early movement in which the trade unions of that time formed the most active section.

The Owenite agitation again attracted the support of the trade unions and it was these organizations that furnished the nucleus of the movement. The Knights of Labor was more a political than an industrial organization and in every wave of protest that has swept the nation since that time the trade unions have taken a leading part.

No Anti-Political Tradition.

There is, therefore, no anti-political tradition so far as the trade unions of the United States are concerned. There is a plenitude of confusion of thought and a disposition to follow what appears to be the line of least resistance, such as the support of liberal candidates on the capitalist party

tickets, but this is no evidence of any anti-political bias.

Reasons for Present Methods.

It seems to me that one of the principal reasons for the ineffective and non-working class character of the present political activity of the trade unions is to be found in the fact that in the United States, owing to conditions which can not be detailed in an article of this length, the trade unions never have been able to convince the ruling class that they have a right to exist, that they are a permanent part of our social structure and must be recognized as such. This fact is made clear during every period of stagnation in industry bringing widespread unemployment. The national associations of employers no sooner see an overstocked labor market than the cry of "wipe out the unions" is raised. In no other great capitalist nation is this condition found. The recent open shop drive is only the most recent evidence of this attitude.

It is a little too much to expect that such an extremely feeble trade union movement should develop a powerful political movement.

American Ideology.

Although a very large percentage of the union membership is of foreign birth and extraction, not citizens of the United States, the ideological basis of trade union organization is American citizenship. The right of franchise is considered the guarantee of political and economic equality and, in practice, this becomes for the trade unions a hostility to any form of political action based on the class struggle.

Effect of Weakness.

The weakness of the trade union movement and the constant and bitter struggle that even the

most conservative unions are forced to conduct, combined with this typical American viewpoint, makes the leadership hesitate to place in the hands of the employers what they, the leaders, believe to be an effective weapon — ability to charge and prove radical tendencies.

Demanding, as American citizens, a mythical, but, to them, very real thing known as the American standard of living, these officials view with a holy horror, absolutely incomprehensible to the average revolutionist, any act or utterance that would make it difficult to defend their loyalty to American institutions.

Concrete Rewards.

In many sections of the trade union movement favorable working conditions, high wages, and job control are obtained quite as often by political deals and trades as they are by the economic strength of the unions.

To the building trades in many cities the appointment of building, plumbing, electrical, and health inspectors favorable to the unions is a matter of vital importance. In municipal elections such issues as these will arouse the greatest interest in the unions and any form of political activity that would alienate the union's friends in either the Democratic or Republican Parties is frowned upon.

The labor union government of San Francisco, under Abe Ruef and P.H. McCarthy, is a case in point.

Defensive Activity.

There is again the necessity for securing neutrality from the police force during strikes, the ability to "spring" arrested strikers, immunity from prosecution from various necessary activities a hostile administration could make much of, etc.

Much of the political activity that secures the privileges mentioned is altogether valueless,

much of it positively harmful, but political activity it is, nonetheless.

Organs of Political Expression.

The state federations of labor and the central labor bodies — city central councils — are the political organs of the American Federation of Labor. They have no executive power under the laws of the AF of L, but in political matters they are allowed considerable latitude. They are the only bodies through which the labor unions, as such, find organized political expression and are important because of that fact.

Constant Activity.

In many cities the political activities of these two bodies are of an intensive nature. The state federation of labor watches all legislation proposed at the state capitals, keeps the union membership informed of favorable or hostile measures, and many times finds it necessary to secure the passage of resolutions for or against certain measures and even to organize demonstrations against them. Last year in New York the labor unions sent a veritable army of representatives to Albany to protest against the enactment of bills menacing labor organizations.

Ease of Betrayal.

The officials entrusted with the responsibility of passing on laws or candidates for labor to oppose or support develop a high degree of skill in political maneuvering; they often betray the interests of the labor movement and certainly nothing could be easier with the present level of political consciousness among the rank and file; the wonder is that it does not occur more often.

Progress.

To one familiar with the lack of cohesion and common program in trade union political activities, the organization of the Conference for Progressive Political Action was an advance step for the trade union movement.

It has no class character — quite the reverse — its program is hopelessly inadequate, but for the first time thousands of local unions, scores of central bodies, and dozens of state federations of labor found themselves uniting on a program that gave them a national political viewpoint and a common program, mild and ineffective as it was and is.

Effects Apparent.

The burden of carrying out this program falls upon the most advanced groups in the American Federation of Labor — delegates to the central bodies and state federations of labor — who are always the most active and the best informed of the union membership. Because of the disillusionment brought by the war, the bankruptcy of the farmers, with whom most state federations are in close touch, the evident failure of the local “reward and punish” policy in national politics, the idea of divorce from the capitalist parties is sympathetically entertained by central bodies and state federations, nor has the Gompers machine been signally successful in sabotaging the new development. Political consciousness is growing in the trade unions and the idea of their non-political character — never entirely true — must be revised.

Important Development.

For communists this is an interesting and important development. No working class movement without clear political vision and understanding ever can become a menace to the capi-

talist class, and there is no more important task for the communists in the trade unions than to assist this development by activity based on knowledge of the strength and weaknesses, the ignorance and prejudices of the membership of the American labor movement.

Of Strategic Importance.

There is no better starting point than propaganda for a wholesale desertion of the parties of the employers, based on a wealth of concrete instances of betrayal, both by candidates and labor officials, for a Farmer-Labor Party controlled by the unions and farmer organizations.

With this idea of a class party every honest unionist is in sympathy, although he may be held from work for it and participation in it by fear of losing some immediate advantage.

In additions to these fears he must reckon with the bureaucracy, which now has abandoned all pretense of ruling by consent of the rank and file. Control of the unions today is a machine-like process comparable only to the manner in which the capitalist state maintains power. The bureaucracy in no way expresses the desire of the membership for expansion of political activity, but opposes it.

Great Opportunities.

With this is a beginning, however, and with the growth of the movement itself, the bars are down for political agitation of a far more fundamental character — for Communist propaganda — impossible when the only political issue discussed is the extent of the friendship of Republican or Democratic candidates.

Extension of Party Activity.

Party activity in the trade unions from now on must take on more of a Communist character — it must be more political. We have won the sympathy of the left wing with our slogan of amalgamation and the work for this objective now is largely of an organizational character — the mobilization of sympathizers in the fights against the sabotage and terror of the bureaucracy.

Our Task.

The defeats of the railway men in particular, on the industrial field, has given impetus to political thinking. The shopmen know that it was the capitalist government that beat them.

To drive this lesson home with all its corollaries is the task of the Communists, and a task that our previous campaigns have made not easy, but possible.

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