Opportunism Within The Trade-Union Left Wing

By Earl R. Browder

DESPITE the considerable advances being made by the left wing in the American trade unions, it is still a fact that its progress is hampered, to quite an extent, by the remnants of opportunism still existing in the theory and practice of certain sections of the left-wing movement. This opportunistic tendency is, at this moment, being aggravated by the "left" tendency which is equally harmful. The two tendencies are springing from the same root. They are also directly related (in a political sense and often organically) to the tendency designated by the Comintern as "Loreism," the remnants of the Second-and-half International Ideology, within the Communist movement of America.

We have had much experience with these deviations within the American left-wing movement. In the struggle against them we have experienced such resistance as was to be expected from an existence which has been confused—resistance to centralized leadership, surrender of initiative to temporary alliances, lack of clear definition of left-wing policies, insistence of temporary and sectional over general interests, etc., with an accompanying inclination to division, on the one hand, to impatient demand for "practical" results before a solid basis has been laid in work, and, on the other hand, to be satisfied with formal victories from which the substance has disappeared by loss of the masses on any or on every question before us now, and upon its solution depends the future of our movement.

The same deviations were strongly in evidence in districts of the miners' union where the leftist elements are numerous. It is only under the tremendous pressure of the coal industry, and the consequent bitter struggle for control unequalled upon American soil, that these errors are now being straightened out in the Illinois field. If the left wing had become two years ago, a solid, homogeneous monolithic body with a centralized leadership and clear-cut policies, the struggle would today be much more favorable for the left wing.

Deviations in the Needle Trades.

It is in the needle trades that our problem is presented in its most acute form at the present moment. Their story is one of the saddest evidences of the conditions of trade-union work and in general political problems and constitutes a phase of Loreism, which must be combated equally as this as "impractical," "abstract," and "factional." But the problem is of the most enormous practical significance, and the solution of the question before us now, and upon its solution depends the future of the American labor movement for years to come, that it was decided to publish this article in the WORKERS MONTHLY to bring the facts more forcibly to the notice of the membership of the American labor movement, to give it to the members of the party in America, is the complete unity of theory and practice in the field of trade union work.

A prominent characteristic of Loreism, a tendency which must be combated in all of its forms, is the artificial separation of revolutionary theory and practice—of the "revolutionary" and the "practical." They know they must have both these qualities, but find that the combination is difficult. The situation is complicated by the fact that from time to time they may be "revolutionary" part of the time and on some issues, while at other times and on other issues they may be "practical." Insidiously there has developed a contradiction, a divergence, between theory and practice which, if allowed to develop unchecked, and keep their connection with the revolutionary objective. But always the trick that avoids the disastrous results of opportunism sets in, it gives rise to "impractical" and "abstract" policies, splitting tendencies, etc.

The opportunist who has "reformed" (but who has failed to grasp the essentials of Leninism) is almost sure to become the "socialist" (or "Christian Social" as it is sometimes called, until it becomes its logical conclusion must inevitably destroy the left-wing movement. This in its most acute form at the present moment. Here we have the executive committee of the American labor movement for years to come, that it was decided to publish this article in the WORKERS MONTHLY to bring the facts more forcibly to the notice of the membership of the American labor movement, to give it to the members of the party in America, is the complete unity of theory and practice in the field of trade union work.

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