

The Open Letter and the Struggle Against the N.R.A.

By EARL BROWDER

IT is almost three months since the Party issued the Open Letter to the membership. This letter called for a sharp change in the methods of our work, a drive into the basic industries and into the shops, the rooting of the Party among the decisive strata of the working class by leading and organizing their struggles for their daily economic and political needs. It is time to begin to review what we have accomplished to carry out the Open Letter, to see where the weak points are in the battle line, how we can strengthen our advance.

We need to know exactly where we are. There is no value to us in bubbling enthusiasm which optimistically sees everything through rosy spectacles that magnify our little achievements and hide our shortcomings. This way is beset with great dangers. Nor can we waste our valuable time listening to the croakings of the pessimists, who see crepe hanging on our door, chaos and confusion in our house. These downhearted ones project their own inner condition as that of the movement, and try to make their picture into the reality. Neither of these is the attitude of the Bolshevik, who brings enthusiasm to his work, not by feeding on illusions but, on the contrary, precisely by making the most objective estimate of reality and finding that program of action which will transform the reality into something more satisfactory.

Our Open Letter is a program of action, and our job is to find the best, most effective means to carry it out in life.

Have we moved ahead a few steps? Yes, in some respects. The trade unions in which we play a leading role have led many struggles, and won a high percentage of victories for the workers. As a result, these unions are growing; they have multiplied their membership about three times in the last three months. And some of this advance has been in decisive industries; in steel, where the Steel and Metal Workers Industrial Union is becoming a mass organization, as a result of winning the first strikes in the industry since 1919-20; in textiles, where the National Textile Workers

Union is playing an outstanding role in independently organizing and leading the workers, and in establishing a united front from below with the workers in the reformist unions.

These victories are the fruits of three factors: (1) The spontaneous upsurge of the workers' struggles and their radicalization, which we have begun to equip ourselves to organize and direct; through (2) the improvement in the political line and methods of work of the Party, by applying the directives of the Open Letter; and (3) our correct analysis of the N.R.A. and the "New Deal", and the prompt and fearless tactical application of the methods of struggle worked out at the Extraordinary Party Conference.

In all cases where we have a proper understanding of these three factors, there we have made considerable advances. Where we have continued to stagnate, that is where one or all of these factors are not yet understood.

The lack of understanding of these factors is a concrete expression of the right danger in our Party, sometimes expressed as slowness of orientation, sometimes as a reflection of opportunist ideas, of moods of pessimism and capitulation.

SPONTANEOUS UPSURGE AND RADICALIZATION

Already in 1932, at our Fifteenth Plenum, we noted the gradual rise of the strike movement, we spoke sharply against the tendency to ignore or underestimate it, and we predicted the rise of a decisive wave of mass strikes. In January 1933, we declared that this wave had begun, signalized by the Detroit automobile strikes which, for the first time during the crisis, won wage advances in a basic industry. At the Extraordinary Party Conference in July, the wave was well under way. Since then it has been swelling into ever larger volume.

Now the strike movement is epidemic. The old fear of the workers in the factories that open activity would result in immediate victimization has been broken down generally. The workers are in motion *in masses*.

Unfortunately, not everywhere have our comrades understood that these new conditions require that they shall, while not abandoning the old tactics of slow and patient work of building up the factory groups by adding individual workers one by one, supplement this by bold initiative of mass action and organization where the workers in mass are spontaneously beginning to move. Too often our comrades have confined themselves within the limits of very secret, very conspiratorial work of setting up the first contacts and groups, in a situation which is already crying aloud for a bold and decisive call to mass action in the open.

We still underestimate the spontaneous upsurge of the masses. This is true in every district, some more and some less so. As a result, we drag behind the mass activity, instead of being at the head of it. This in turn holds back the whole mass movement, which, without our conscious revolutionary leadership, remains at a lower level of consciousness. We, on our part, become the victims of spontaneity, instead of the vanguard which brings consciousness and organization to the masses.

These moving masses are becoming radicalized. Their movements are the result of the beginnings of radicalization, and their experiences in action are the cause of further radicalization. Throughout our movement we still hear comrades talking only about the "disillusionment" of the workers. But let us give more attention to their *radicalization*, which proceeds swiftly, and every step of which results in the development of mass struggles, even when it still carries along with it the remnants of the Rooseveltian illusions.

The prevailing underestimation of the radicalization of the workers causes us to make all sorts of opportunist mistakes, unnecessary "concessions" to a non-existing "backwardness" of the masses, a totally unjustified fear to bring forward boldly our program and our Party (and our *Daily Worker*), and even a fear to bring forward the trade unions of the T.U.U.L., before these masses. Today we are losing a thousand times more masses by these fears, hesitation, and lagging behind, than by going too fast, than by scaring away the workers by bringing too soon to them our Party and its program.

Many examples have been pointed out in the *Daily Worker* of these opportunist mistakes. Those cases where Party comrades have deliberately kept the *Daily Worker* away from striking masses, fearing that the "red scare" would disrupt the strike, while the non-Party masses demand the *Daily Worker* and spontaneously act themselves to provide the strikers with it—these cases are a danger signal to the entire Party. The same danger exists in a thousand variations, many of them more subtle, harder to recognize, but equally dangerous.

IS THE OPEN LETTER CORRECT?

The second factor making for weakness and mistakes in our work is lack of understanding of the Open Letter and the political line of the Party. Here we will not take up any more time with those who consider the Open Letter as "just another document", who read it mechanically and then forget it. Those are the "dead

souls" who no longer have anything to give to the movement. In addition to these, there are some comrades who have honest confusion and doubts about concrete questions of policy. Such confusion and doubts are a weakening factor in our work, and make for passivity, working at cross-purposes, and if not cleared up, to serious political differences with these comrades.

For example, one comrade has sent to *The Communist* a long article entitled, "The Open Letter Is Lacking in Political Clarity". He challenges the Party line on four points: (1) the building of the revolutionary unions; (2) our opposition to a Farmer-Labor Party; (3) our estimate of fascization in the U. S.; and (4) our analysis of the causes of fluctuation of the Party membership. These are indeed fundamental questions. Let us briefly answer his criticisms, because by so doing we at the same time attack doubts and weaknesses in many members of the Party who are not able to express them so readily as was this comrade.

This comrade says that to build the revolutionary unions really means "to run away and leave the masses under the full control of the A. F. of L." In this policy he finds the secret of our sectarianism. He does not openly advocate the abandonment of the revolutionary unions, as Lovestone and Cannon do, but his argument is fully in their direction. He makes one reservation; where "as in the case of the furriers' union", the new union has "actually the mass support", then the revolutionary unions are justified. Finally, he advises that we must re-read Lenin's pamphlet *Should Communists Participate in Reactionary Trade Unions?*

We emphatically agree with the last point. Lenin's pamphlet is one of our most necessary text-books. (By the way, a new edition of it is needed.) And if Comrade Bell had studied it more carefully, he could hardly have come to the conclusion that it is our duty to bring the unorganized masses into the A. F. of L., or that, when in the A. F. of L., we should leave the workers there at all costs, even to surrendering our independent class-struggle policy. The central fallacy of his argument is exposed by his "exception" of the furriers' union from his general rule. Today the revolutionary furriers' union has the overwhelming mass of the workers in its ranks, so he is forced to admit its right to existence; but it was not always so. We worked in the reformist furriers' union and won the masses; then the bureaucrats expelled us, and smashed the union. We started the revolutionary union, small at first, while the bureaucrats tried to re-establish the reformist union and, for a while, forced the masses to register with them with the help of the bosses. During that period, all Comrade Bell's arguments would have forced us, if we accepted them, to surrender to the bureaucrats. But

we did not take such a simple and "logical" line, the easy way. We both proceeded with building the new union, and also working within the reformist union, until, by a correct united front tactic, we won over the whole mass of the workers into our revolutionary union. Comrade Bell accepts the result, but he denies the correctness of the path which brought these results. Further, his argument would lead him to the position of Muste, who refuses to support the Steel and Metal Workers Union in its splendid struggles and organization campaign, because the A. F. of L. has a corrupt and moribund union in the industry, and is trying to organize "federal" (semi-company) unions—a clearly liquidatory position. Eventually it leads to acceptance of the dictum of William Green (already fully accepted by Lovestone and Cannon) that "there is no room in the U. S. for any labor organization except the A. F. of L."

No, there is no unclarity in the Open Letter on this point. It is clearly against the arguments of Comrade Bell, and all who think along those lines.

On the question of Farmer-Laborism, Comrade Bell argues abstractly for four pages that an F.L.P. should be supported "because it will help to drive a wedge between the bourgeoisie and the working class"; he says he "is open to conviction", but that the Open Letter doesn't convince, "is not clear". But the Open Letter is clear; it points out, concretely, not by abstract logic, that today the reformists and sections of the bourgeoisie, seeing the maturing of revolutionary mass movements, are trying to erect all kinds of barriers to hold such movements away from the path of revolutionary struggle, to prevent them from coming under the leadership of the Communists. It declared that chief among such barriers are the projects for a Farmer-Labor Party. There is nothing unclear about this. One can disagree with it, like Norman Thomas, John Dewey, Lovestone, and Cannon (or has Cannon again changed his mind since Trotsky's latest letter?), but one cannot misunderstand it, or find lack of clarity.

Comrade Bell thinks we are unclear about the development of fascism in America. He cites many things as "proof of the full fascist control of the American government", which he thinks we should recognize. But all he proves is that the capitalist class has full control; elements of fascization are present and growing; but developed, matured fascism is still a stage which has not been reached and which can be avoided by bold mass struggles. Our fight against the N. R. A., for workers' rights and better conditions, is a fight against fascization, but it is not helped by declaring that fascism is already the ruling system. It is Comrade Bell who is

unclear and confused. Our Extraordinary Conference gave a clear and correct analysis of this question.

Comrade Bell complains that the Open Letter is "criticism to the point of besmirching the Party members"; but then himself proceeds to find the explanation of the fluctuation of membership by the stupidity and "parrot-like" activities of the Party units. Both points are entirely wrong. The Open Letter is an instrument of self-criticism of the entire Party, to overcome its weaknesses, sharpest toward the leadership but "besmirching" no one, leaders or rank and file. And the greatest weakness of our units is the remaining influence of such muddled thinking as that of Comrade Bell, which drives away new members by creating the impression of confusion in the Party instead of a living political unity expressed in enthusiastic common work.

The Open Letter is clear—and correct. Discussion must proceed in every unit committee and fraction, until all doubts are dissolved in a full understanding of this historic document. This is necessary to our taking full advantage of the favorable situation for Party growth. The right danger, expressed in the immature theorizing of Comrade Bell, exists in even more dangerous form in the practice of many comrades. It must be liquidated in the fires of criticism.

DEVIATIONS IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE N.R.A.

The strongest feature of our Party life in this period has been its unhesitating and correct analysis of and battle against the N.R.A. and the "New Deal". Upon the basis of a clear exposure of its nature as a general attack against the toiling masses and impoverished middle classes, as a program of hunger and war, we worked out realistic tactics to use every possible opportunity of developing the defensive struggles of the workers into a counter-offensive.

Where our work has been weak, where we have suffered setbacks, this can usually be explained wholly or partly by hesitation to accept this line, by our failure to carry it through whole-heartedly, by our surrender to some of the illusions deliberately created by the bourgeoisie among the workers.

Comrade Bell's article reflects these illusions and weaknesses. He thinks we should recognize some progressive features of the N.R.A.; he thinks "it provides the workers with the right to organize themselves", and that we should base our appeal to the masses upon this. Where this theory leads in practice has been shown by some of our trade union work.

In a certain city some of our very good and hard-working comrades, acting upon the theory of Comrade Bell, approached the workers in a metal factory to organize them. Our comrades said: "Organize under the N.R.A., and support our President in his holy war against the depression". When a company stool-pigeon demanded to know if any Communists were mixed up in this move, our comrades hastened to assure the workers that all Communists were a thousand miles away. They thought they were very cleverly outwitting the reformist leaders and Roosevelt and the N.R.A. The inevitable happened within three weeks, when the first A. F. of L. bureaucrat came along and had us thrown out on our ears; the workers are not afraid of Communists, but they have no confidence in anyone who thinks it necessary to deny his true character. Our comrades had made themselves politically indistinguishable from the reformists, but the reformists had the advantage of being "honest" in their support of Roosevelt.

Many times we have found extreme fears among our leading groups, about the "backwardness" and "illusions regarding N.R.A." among the workers they are leading; but when we have convinced our leaders to actually go among these masses with a bold presentation of our position, then we find that the backwardness and illusions were to a great extent creations of the imagination. They didn't exist except as ghosts. A little light, and they disappeared. For example, a revolutionary union with beginnings of mass membership faced a drive of the employers to bring workers and bosses together in an N.R.A. parade, as a means of putting across the "truce" to prevent wage increases. Our leading comrades hesitated; they knew what should be done, but they were afraid of the "backwardness and illusions" of the workers. After a discussion they were convinced they must boldly fight the N.R.A. parade. The results are shown in the following report from the field:

"A few days following the discussion we had with you comrades here, regarding our policy on N.R.A. parades, a businessmen's committee came to our union headquarters and in front of about 40 members requested our union to join the N.R.A. parade. They were told that the matter had to be taken up officially with the membership before an answer could be given. The parade was held with no members of our union and very few workers in it, as the various locals voted almost unanimously against participation.

"Also, in the ——— strike, there arose a situation where it was necessary that a sharp and open attack be made against the N.R.A. and Roosevelt, if we were to prevent our ranks from being broken by N.R.A. representatives, who were maneuvering to get into the situation. At a full membership meeting (the big majority of strikers are "Roosevelt Democrats"), we spoke in the sharpest manner. The response was splendid on the part of the strikers.

"These events are a valuable indication as to what can actually be done in exposing the N.R.A. if carried through in the proper manner. I am quite sure that there is a pronounced tendency of hesitation in many sections of our Party when it comes to open struggle against Roosevelt and the N.R.A. These workers were no different from those in any other industry or other part of the country."

If it is necessary to face boldly these issues, and to place our position squarely before the workers (and this has been proved), it is, however, equally necessary to insist upon a *convincing* presentation of our position. Too many times our comrades resort to mere shouting, and unclear slogans, to express their opposition to the N.R.A. For example, in one industry the union got out a leaflet for mass distribution, consisting of a few slogans, among which the chief one was: "Down with the National Racketeering Act". Of course, this kind of thing convinces not a single worker, but, on the contrary, may drive away some hesitating elements. We must start from the issues in the life of the workers concerned, which objectively place their immediate interests in opposition to the aims of the N.R.A.; we must patiently and in detail explain these issues; we must show the workers how, by fighting, they can win their demands, but only in struggle against the N.R.A.; and then give proposals for the organization of the fight. With this proper approach we can win large masses of even the most "backward" workers.

On these issues it is clear that the main weakness, the main danger, is that of surrendering to the illusions, of hesitating and capitulating before difficulties, instead of facing them and overcoming them. The same result comes from "leftist" blustering, sterile slogan-shouting of a smart-aleck nature, which is only another way of running away from the real task of *convincing* the workers of the need and possibility of successful struggle.

UNITED FRONT AGAINST THE N.R.A.

In the struggle against N.R.A. are the widest opportunities for applying the tactic of the united front. This was proved in the Cleveland gathering of the Trade Union Conference for United Action. There we united A. F. of L. left-wing unions and minorities, with the Muste tendency, and the revolutionary unions and some independent unions, on a clear platform of struggle against N.R.A. on the basis of the united front.

How this develops in mass action is being shown in the great silk strike. There we have gained a decisive position in the leadership of the masses, chiefly through the correctness of our political attitude to the N.R.A. and the sell-outs conducted under the Blue Eagle

by the A. F. of L. and Socialist leadership. By means of this correct political position we are gradually building up our strength organizationally.

Our advances in the silk industry were achieved only by overcoming all sorts of opportunist tendencies in our own ranks. There also we had to convince our Party comrades that the masses were not so "backward" as they thought, that the masses were ready to fight, and that when they fight, then their illusions can be quickly shattered by a clear, convincing and simple presentation of the class issues involved.

We have really built a united front from below in the silk strike. The main mass of workers follows our slogans; they have united picket lines; they have built a central strike committee of elected delegates from almost half of the strikes over a big territory, involving independent unions, the N.T.W.U., and several A. F. of L. locals. They have defeated the sell-out of the MacMahon A. F. of L. "five-week truce", and are marching toward a national strike of the entire industry, against the N.R.A., the employers, the Labor Board, the A. F. of L., and the Socialist Party. They have good prospects of winning substantial improvements in wages and conditions.

BUILDING THE PARTY AND DECREASING FLUCTUATION

The greatest danger signal to the Party today is the slowness of recruiting new members, and the high degree of fluctuation of membership whereby we lose about the same number we gain, with the total membership remaining at about 20,000 for many months.

This is the result, primarily, of insufficient clarity on the Party line in the every-day work, of insufficient understanding of the Open Letter, and its still weak application in life. One sign of the confusion that hinders the building of the Party is the existence of such ideas as those expressed by Comrade Bell's article mentioned before. This Hamlet-like balancing between the Party line and the position of the renegades, social-fascists, and reformists, is a poisonous influence inside our Party, and can do more than anything else (even when expressed by only a few comrades) to drive away workers from our Party.

To build the Party and the revolutionary trade union movement, it is necessary to take up a sharply intolerant attitude towards such vacillations and waverings on the Party line. Only a strong, bold application of the Party line can win and hold workers in the Party and unions.

That means that the Party line must not only be talked about, but that it must be applied in the life of each Party unit, committee, and fraction. It must be applied collectively, according to a plan,

which is the only way to get the Party, as an organized body, into action as a mass leader and organizer. It must be applied on the basis of the tasks of each particular unit, committee, or fraction. When this is done, then the Party life will become rich and interesting. Where it is done, the Party begins to grow in numbers, to hold its membership, to become a mass influence.

A tremendous opportunity is before our movement now, to become a broad mass movement rooted among the American workers. A great opportunity lies before our Party to become a mass Party.

We have begun to move, in some industries and localities, and in some phases of our work, along the lines of the Open Letter. But the progress is spotty, and not yet consolidated. A serious study of our weaknesses, a determined and sustained effort to overcome them, an intolerant struggle on two fronts—against the chief danger, the right danger, and against “leftist” phrase-mongering—this is the order of the day, that we may move forward more determinedly toward the leadership of the great class struggles maturing in the U. S. A.