

Trade Union Fractions Still Lack Sufficient Political Life

By F. BROWN

How can we strengthen our influence and develop a progressive movement in the A. F. of L. and become the driving force in the strengthening of the unions in spite of the obstacles placed before the workers at every step by the reformist bureaucratic friendship? How best, shall the Communists act inside the unions to speed the process of making the existing unions instruments for organizing the unorganized? How shall we unite the workers on a platform of struggle for industrial unionism, inner democracy, against war and fascism, and for a Farmer Labor Party?

The change of tactics in the trade union field which brought us forward in achieving unity in the trade union movement and strengthening the position of the progressive forces in the A. F. of L. which are today engaged in a struggle for "industrial unionism," raises the question: "How best to have our Party forces coordinated in the trade unions?"

Until now our fractions have never functioned as well as they should. Only a small percentage of the comrades were involved in fraction work. The fractions lacked and still lack political life, their activities have been limited mainly to the inner problems of the unions. The political campaigns have insufficiently been brought in. No real efforts were made to draw into the ranks of the Party the best and most militant trade unionists.

Changes This Year

It was only in the past year, with the changes that have taken place in the direction of trade union unity, with the new conditions which have risen, that we have seriously considered the problem of how to strengthen the fractions organizationally and politically as a prerequisite to concretizing our line in the trade union field.

Today, all Party members, even those who at first resisted the new tactics in the trade union field, by

which tens of thousands of workers previously organized in revolutionary and independent unions today constitute a large part, and the best part of the progressive forces in the A. F. of L., understand perfectly the political significance and importance of unity of the trade union movement. They understand the necessity of anchoring ourselves more strongly among the organized masses which represent the advance forces of the toiling population, and our task of raising the fighting ability of the organized movement by transforming the A. F. of L. unions into "industrial unions." They are already active in mobilizing the trade unions to make of them the main basis for a Farmer Labor Party.

Are Fractions Proper

Due to these reasons many of our comrades, especially those comrades active in the trade union field, have been in the past period asking whether the fractions are still the proper form of organization; or whether some readjustment and changes are necessary to further improve our work in the unions. The same question was raised with the old problem of duplication of activity (Party work in the trade unions, and Party work on a neighborhood scale). Furthermore, we were trying to form a correct organizational solution to the problem of strengthening our position in certain industries in which we had only a few scattered forces.

As a solution to this burning question, here and there the idea was advanced of organizing units in a given union or local which would constitute the Party in the unions, as do the nuclei in the factories, with all consequent implications. Further proposals were made to build "industrial units" embracing the Party members of a given industry as a transitional form toward the building of shop nuclei. The November Plenum took up

these problems and decided to have the Party carefully study these organizational problems and carry through some experiments with units on the basis of industries and units in unions for the purpose of gathering the necessary experiences, and drawing the correct conclusions at the next convention.

Careful Experiment

Following the guiding line given in the concluding remarks of Comrade Browder at the November Plenum that while we must be quite fearless in the development of new forms, we must always be that kind of Bolshevik, who never loses anything of the old while transforming into the new; that there must be no wild, no unchecked, uncontrolled experiments, but with careful and political control, bold experiments must be carried out to find those organizational forms that will fit our Party most quickly and thoroughly to the needs of the mass movement.

The comrades became active in New York and other districts to find those forms that would best suit the needs of the mass movement. The experiments in New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland and other places on the basis of units in industries are proving today the correctness of such a form. It is through such a unit of the Party among the truck drivers and other categories of drivers in Milwaukee that the Party is strengthening its position in the industry as a whole, is gaining influence among the workers in the various depots, as well as in the craft unions which separate the various categories of drivers. In New York we have the example of an industrial unit of printers composed of fourteen members which concentrates on three printing shops. This new form of organization brought enthusiasm among the comrades, and we can already see the first results. The unit prepared a list of

contacts in the three shops for the purpose of winning the class-conscious printers to our ranks. It has already increased the sale of Party literature, of the Daily Worker, and has decided to sell 100 copies of the Labor Party pamphlet. In a few words, the unit, besides discussing cally discusses the problem of the problems of the union, specifies shops on which they are concentrating, and is correctly combining the daily issues with the political issues confronting the printers particularly, and the working class as a whole.

Encouraging Conclusions

We can also, in New York especially, already draw very encouraging conclusions in regard to the units built in the unions. The experiences of a few units in painters' and bakers' locals show that through such a form of organization it is possible to improve the political life and discussions of the units, and therefore bring about a fuller attendance at meetings, to cut fluctuation and increase recruiting among the best and most militant rank-and-file members of the unions. Through these new forms we are able to sell hundreds of pamphlets, Daily Workers and other literature, to trade unionists. Political issues, such as the Farmer-Labor Party, are thoroughly discussed and brought to the organized masses with very good results.

Today, on the basis of such experiences, we can draw the conclusion that in the case of certain light industries, based on small shops with a small number of workers, such a form of organization is the proper one. For example, in the building trades unions, where carpenters and painters work seasonally, are scattered over hundreds of places (in the case of the larger cities), and move about to a large extent; in the case of printers, bakers, etc., in practically all those

trades that correspond to small shops where the Communists come in contact with fellow workers through the unions, such a form of organization fits the actual needs in strengthening our ties with these masses.

By strengthening our position among the organized and unorganized masses of small industries, especially in the larger cities, we shall be able to increase our influence also in the proletarian neighborhoods, by orientating the trade unions to directly participate in local issues of vital importance for the toiling population (municipal problems, election campaign, struggle against war and Fascism, etc.).

Warns Against Generalizing

At this point, however, it is my opinion, that we must warn against generalizing the fitness of such forms for all unions and industries. Such a mechanical approach to this problem would lead us to a complete underestimation of the role of the shop nuclei.

It is clear that in small industrial towns, for example, where there is one basic industry, where the workers are only partly organized, where the town identifies itself with the factory, an industrial unit would limit the Party activity to the organized workers only and lose sight of the problems facing the workers both organized and unorganized in the factory and town. In all cases of organized factories in heavy industry where there are Party members, it is clear that our problem is not to build units in the union, but to build shop nuclei which will act simultaneously as fractions in the union and will take care of both problems in the factories and unions.

In unions embracing the workers of the basic industries, such a form of organization would be nothing more than a substitute for the shop nuclei, since the locals of the unions,

as in the case of mining territories, correspond to the various mines or mining towns. In the case of other categories of workers in the basic industries that are not highly organized (steel, auto, for example), such a form of organization, including all employed Party members, would separate us from the unorganized masses that we must reach and speak to through the shop nuclei and through the shop papers. (Detroit is a glaring example.)

Tasks Differ

There are unions and industries in which our task will be to build units (bearing in mind the connection between shop work and trade union work). There are unions where our task will be to strengthen and improve the activities of the fractions, and in the case of heavy industry, the shop nuclei must remain the fundamental form of organization which acts simultaneously as a fraction.

To avoid mistakes, to achieve good results, we must keep in mind that we must organize on the basis of the needs and conditions that vary from state to state, from city to city (for example, while Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago are centers of heavy industry embracing tens of thousands of workers—New York and other cities are centers of hundreds of small industries); from union to union and that every move in the direction of improving, readjusting our organizational forms must be guided and controlled by the leading bodies. The experiments so far have proven not only the ability of our Party to readjust itself organizationally to the needs of the situation, but also the correct approach of our Party members to such problems.

Every Party member a Party builder!