

# PROBLEMS OF ORGANISED LABOUR IN THE U.S.

WM. Z. FOSTER

**I**N the American labour movement the question of labour unity in the broadest sense—both ideological and organisational—is of great scope and urgency. In this country this general problem assumes primitive aspects, such as are not to be found in any other major industrial land. This question of labour unity can best be understood in the light of the class struggle tasks and responsibilities now confronting organised labour of the United States. These burdens are so heavy and complex as to have not only national but also international importance.

First, there is the question of combatting the war drive of American imperialism. The industrial tycoons of Wall Street are resolved upon world conquest, and they are willing to wade through another world war in a desperate attempt to achieve it. Their Eisenhower Administration, like the Truman Administration before it, is fully controlled by monopoly capital and is orientating upon the perspective of an inevitable all-out war against the Soviet Union, People's China, and the European People's Democracies. This is the clear meaning of the \$50 billion yearly war budget, the construction of war bases all over the world, the frantic attempt to build N.A.T.O. and to rearm Germany and Japan, and the poisonous campaign to militarise the American people. Obviously to defeat all this presents a gigantic problem for the labour movement.

The world democratic forces have made splendid achievements in slowing up the war drive of American imperialism, and in easing international tensions, but that a real war danger still persists is all too clearly shown by American interference in Korea, Indo-China, and elsewhere. The most dangerous aspect of American foreign aggression is the so-called 'liberation' policy of Eisenhower and Dulles. This is a programme of fomenting civil war in the countries of Socialism and People's Democracy. Its threatening potentialities were shown by the serious American-organised 'insurrection' in East Germany on June 17, 1953, which might have caused a desperate civil war.

The second basic problem now confronting the American labour movement is that of protecting the workers from the developing economic crisis. For the past fifteen years American industry has

been booming along on the basis of the production of munitions for World War II, the Korean war, and in the gigantic preparations for a war against the Soviet Union and its friends. But now this war boom is coming to an end, and many signs of crisis are at hand. Agriculture has fallen into a deep slump, the production of steel—the industry for years has been operating at 100 per cent. capacity—is now down to 70 per cent. and the textile, automobile, coal mining, and various other industries are also experiencing a serious falling off of production. Close to 6,000,000 workers are unemployed, many millions more are working part-time, and the number is on the increase. Economic storm signals are flying and the capitalists are greatly alarmed. The Eisenhower government, which operates on the Keynesian ‘managed-economy’ theory that economic crisis can be prevented, or virtually so, by ‘pump-priming’ policies, has been unable to check the economic decline. All of which obviously presents grave responsibilities to organised labour, in the protection of the jobs and the living standards of the working class.

The third basic problem facing American labour at this time is that of combatting growing fascism in the United States. This sinister development has major roots in the war programme of American imperialism. It got well started under the Truman Administration, in the loyalty tests, thought-control laws, persecution of Communists, and the whole spate of reactionary legislation adopted during the Truman years. The Korean war especially stimulated the malignant growth. Since the Eisenhower administration has been in power during the past sixteen months, this incipient fascism has become distinctly more dangerous. Eisenhower is grossly appeasing McCarthy, who is becoming more and more a powerful figure in the Republican Party. McCarthyism, which is American fascism, has become a real menace. Never in the history of the American Republic have the people been so intimidated and terrorised ideologically as they are now by the hysterical campaign of red-baiting and Soviet-hating at present going on. All this, of course, is of the most vital concern to labour, the Negro people, the poorer farmers, and all other democratic strata.

Naturally, the responsibility for leading the struggle against these three threatening dangers—the war drive of Wall Street, the developing economic crisis, and McCarthyite fascism—devolves upon the organised labour movement. And to meet this grave responsibility organised labour has the most pressing need to strengthen its organisation and its ideology. Let us see, therefore, what, concretely some of these needs are:

First, on the industrial field: In the United States there are at least 16,000,000 organised trade unionists. This is an imposing figure, and the potential strength of such a great body of organised workers could be of decisive importance. But the workers are anything but truly united. Aside from the lack of real solidarity within the specific groups of unions, there are the following separate and often more or less conflicting groups: American Federation of Labour, 10,000,000 members; Congress of Industrial Organisations, 4,000,000; Progressive Independents, 500,000; Miners, 500,000; Railroad Brotherhoods, 500,000; other independents, 500,000. Manifestly, in this field the strength of organised labour is scattered and there is a real need for parallel action by the unions and for the eventual unification of all the unions into one great federation of labour.

Second, on the political field: Here the disunity and weakness of American organised labour is far greater and more patent even than in industry. Actually, the working class has no mass political party whatever, but still remains tied to the two major capitalist parties—overwhelmingly to the Democratic Party. There is no pro-labour party whatever, save the small Progressive Party, which does not have the backing of any of the big labour groups and which polled only a negligible national vote in the last national election. The Socialist Party is insignificant in size, with not over 2,000 to 3,000 members, and the Communist Party, in actual numbers, under the present terroristic conditions, does not count more than 30,000.

The only concrete national political organisations possessed by the trade union movement are the Labour's League for Political Education (A.F. of L.) and the Political Action Committee (C.I.O.), both political agitation organisations, not parties. The railroad unions and miners usually develop similar bodies in election periods. The Labour movement is so unorganised politically that there are not even well-established labour fractions in Congress or in any of the 48 state legislatures. The unification of the workers on the political field through a broad mass labour and labour-farmer party is, therefore, of historic importance to the American Labour movement. In the meantime, the Communist Party is striving to develop the elements of worker organisation within the scope of the Democratic Party.

Third, in the ideological sphere: The most serious disunity and weakness of the American labour movement is the pro-capitalist ideology which dominates it. The top leaders of the trade unions

are open and blatant defenders of the capitalist system, even as are the biggest monopolists in Wall Street. They are supporters of Keynesism (without the name), holding to the conception of 'progressive capitalism'. They believe that economic crises can be averted or at least rendered harmless by government pump-priming. Forty years ago at least one-third of the American labour movement was avowedly committed to Socialism, but today there is not one A.F. of L. or C.I.O. union (or even one prominent leader) that endorses Socialism. This indicates how far-reaching is the grip of Keynesian illusions upon the American labour movement.

The bourgeois-minded leadership of the great mass trade unions in the United States also swallow whole the anti-Soviet, pro-war line of Wall Street big business. Indeed, many of them even outdo the capitalists themselves in their expressions of vicious anti-Soviet hatred. They are also blatant warmongers. Men like George Meany and Walter Reuther, presidents of the A.F. of L. and the C.I.O. respectively, gloried in the June 17 'insurrection' in East Germany and they openly advocated the instigation of civil war in the European People's Democracies and the U.S.S.R. These reactionary elements did not even hesitate to do the filthiest work of the U.S. State Department, in allowing themselves to be used as splitters of the World Federation of Trade Unions, the Latin American Confederation of Labour, the C.I.O. and the labour movements in France and Italy. They also show very little initiative, and often none at all, in fighting the growing fascist menace in the United States. With such a rotten leadership, the masses of workers themselves, while possessed of healthy proletarian fighting instincts, are by no means free of various sorts of capitalist illusions and anti-Soviet moods. The basic strengthening of the ideology of the working class and the development of a leadership accordingly, is the greatest of all the many heavy tasks of unity and development now facing the labour movement in the United States.

The foregoing analysis would seem to sum up to a pretty gloomy picture, but things are not as bad as, at first glance, they might seem. The fact is, the American working class is now going into a period of political awakening and struggle that may, and doubtless will, produce far-reaching consequences. It is a gradual mass movement to the left, but as yet at only a moderate pace. This new and more militant mood of the workers touches all three of the major questions referred to above; namely, those of the war danger, the economic crisis, and McCarthyism.

Regarding the menace of war, it should be borne in mind that the American people suffered comparatively little from the two world wars. Their cities were not bombed, their war casualties were relatively light, and their economic hardships were negligible in contrast with those of other peoples. Consequently, they do not have the bitter memories and great dread of war characteristic of European peoples. Nevertheless, the American people are also peace-loving and do not want war. Their natural repugnance for war has also been greatly increased by the fact that the U.S.S.R. has succeeded in cracking the supposed American monopoly of A and H-bombs. When there is the sure prospect that in case of hostilities your own cities will be atom-devastated, then war against the U.S.S.R. loses much of the 'picnic' atmosphere that would-be A-bomb monopolists have long tried to give it. Consequently, peace-sentiment in the United States, although still largely leaderless, confused and unorganised, represents a great potential political force. It can be mobilised eventually to deal a smashing defeat to the warmongers.

The threatening signs in the economic sphere are also causing much serious thought and alarm in the ranks of the American working class. For the last fifteen years the people of this country, fattening on war munitions production, have been living in pretty much of a fool's paradise. And the protagonists of capitalism, who are noisy and many, have long since undertaken to convince the workers that their war-made prosperity was permanent. This was a favourite theme, among others, of the Truman politicians. But now, with production sagging and unemployment growing, the mass tendency is sharply to diverge from these 'prosperity illusions'. Although the great economic crisis of the 1929 period is now two decades in the past, recollections of its horrors still linger in the mind of the masses. This is why the trade unions, stirring somewhat from their prosperity-bred somnolence and class collaboration, are beginning to wake up, to formulate 'anti-depression' programmes, and to demand that the government bestir itself to prevent a repetition of the 1929-1933 catastrophe. This mass anti-crisis movement is also full of potentialities.

The working masses, including the Negro people and the poorer elements among the farmers, are also beginning to stir regarding McCarthyism. This American-brand fascism has its roots back in the earliest days of the Truman Administration. This was manifested by the many loyalty-pledge, thought-control laws and wholesale prosecutions of Communists of those years. But the great mass

of the workers—and especially the trade union leadership—were not too alarmed at all this. For, with the exception of the Taft-Hartley anti-trade union law, the current political reaction and persecution seemed to be directed only against the Communists, and why worry about them? After all, everybody had a job, wages were good, and ‘everything was lovely and the goose hung high’. But now the picture is radically changed. The crude fascism of McCarthy, with his multi-millionaire backers, is so patently a threat to the whole body of American democratic liberties, that a powerful anti-McCarthy movement is rapidly developing among the working masses. This is manifest in many directions, the rank and file of the unions are seething with it, and in the future it will be heard from.

Obviously, the growing struggle mood of the American working masses, for peace, for a fight to get an ‘anti-depression’ programme, and for a struggle against the looming menace of McCarthy fascism, portends important mass struggles in the United States in the not too distant future. Despite the crass ideological backwardness of the American proletariat, the history of this country shows that great mass struggles can develop on very short notice. With regard to the perspective for labour in the United States, there are two important factors that should be noted, one negative and the other positive.

The negative factor is the intense persecution to which the Communist Party is now being subjected. Our whole national leadership (except two or three of us cripples) has been jailed, or sentenced to jail, and the leadership of every district in the country, except Boston, is also either in jail now or on the way there through the courts. Communists in this country are now second or third class citizens, being denied the right to employment in government services, to work in key industries, to teach in the schools, to serve freely in the armed services, to obtain passports, to hold office in trade unions, etc., etc. The country is fairly dripping with anti-Communist hysteria. Up until now, the policy of the government has been not to outlaw the Communist Party, on the theory that ‘it is easier to control the Communists if the Party is left above-ground.’ But now several bills to outlaw the Party are pending before Congress. All this persecution, of course, hinders the Party from giving the workers the leadership which they now so urgently need, and it is a major factor in the American labour situation.

The second, and positive, factor that should also be noted is an important political stirring among the masses of the organised workers. Most of the labour movement is politically affiliated to

the Democratic Party. Consequently, so long as the reactionary demagogue Truman was in office, there was a strong tendency among the workers to look upon him as their friend and consider his administration as 'their' government. The advent of the Eisenhower régime, however, dealt a shattering blow to all these naive, petty-bourgeois illusions. Eisenhower promptly loaded up his Cabinet with big business men and embarked upon such a rawly reactionary and anti-labour course that even the most opportunistic labour leaders have not dared to peddle the nonsense that he is the friend of the workers. Eisenhower has let it be known that the unions will not get the easy concessions of the recent past. The general result has been that a strong anti-Eisenhower political movement is shaping among the workers. Although this movement as yet does not bear even a hint of becoming a labour party, obviously it definitely has this potentiality. In moving towards class independent political action, the main task at this time is to create elementary opposition movements of workers within the Democratic Party.

It is impossible within the scope of this article to outline our Party's policies for meeting the complex and difficult situation in the United States. As best we can, however, we are striving to give unity, strength and direction to all the mass currents of resistance against economic chaos and against the war and fascism programme of American big business. But these tasks are immense, in the fight for the unification of labour's ranks—in a trade union sense, in the creation of an eventual great political party of labour, the Negro people, and the poorer farmers, and in the cultivation of a Marxist-Leninist ideological unity among the masses, in a pro-peace, anti-fascist, anti-war movement. At the present time the Communist National Committee has before the Party a draft Programme, covering comprehensively the whole range of Party policy. We may count on the American proletariat being heard from strongly in the months and years ahead.

From now on, we may look for a rising tempo of mass struggle in the United States. This will come to a real clash in the coming November elections. As things now stand, the Republicans are counting on McCarthy to carry the election for them. Unless the situation radically changes in the meantime, a major issue will be for or against McCarthyism. If so, this will bring forth a bitter political struggle upon the part of the labour movement and all other democratic forces.