Progressives and Left Wing

The Nature and Role of the CPLA -- Perspectives and Tasks

By Ben Gitlow

In the January 1930 issue of *Labor Age* there appears an appeal: *"The Call to Battle"*— which contains the following words:

"Progressives, this is our day. Communist bankruptcy, foretold in these pages last spring, is now universally conceded. The feeble AF of L leadership continues to mumble about Russia and to sell bonds for Wall Street brokerage houses. It is the progressive group, familiar with the American landscape and with American history, scorning doctrinaire limitations but determined to march forward, that can raise the standard of revolt."

Almost a year has passed since that statment was made. What progress have the progressives made in the face of the bankruptcy of the Communists in the trade unions? Nothing to boast about! For the first time during an economic crisis we have industrial peace. Never before have there been so few strikes with so few workers involved. It is no wonder that the capitalists and their politicians, from President Hoover down, can herald this significant fact. It is no wonder that they can give the "credit" for such a situation to the "loyalty and patriotism" of organized labor which has rejected the policy of strike and struggle in favor of the "constructive policy" of cooperation and peace in industry.

The Situation in the Labor Movement

What has happened to the standard of revolt which the progressives alone were to raise? It was not raised in spite of the fact that very favorable conditions for arousing the workers to action prevailed. These favorable conditions still exist. The severe economic crisis, wide-spread unemployment, wage-cuts, driving and speed-up, are certainly having their effect upon the opinion and attitude of the workers. One does not expect a starving jobless man to be satisfied with conditions. One would be foolish to maintain that a worker is happy to have his wages reduced either thru wage-cuts or part time employment. The man of forty who has been discarded by modern industry is not happy because of his premature "old age." The general insecurity, the fear of unemployment, loss of income, starvation, does not make for contentment. It all makes for discontent. It all fertilizes the soil out of which rebellion grows.

The workers in the trade unions can not escape these conditions. The present economic crisis is too deep, too severe. The worst mistake a working class leader can make is to consider the trade unions as one homogeneous mass, to confuse the membership with the officialdom of the trade unions. A union carpenter who walks the streets for months looking for a job and willing to accept one at $3.00 a day is not exactly the same as his International president, Hutchinson, who lives in luxury and gets a nice fat salary. While the reactionary leaders of the trade unions live and talk like members of the Chamber of Commerce, the masses of the trade union membership live, work, starve and die like workers. The same conditions that are causing discontent among the workers generally are also causing discontent in the ranks of organized labor. Today, thanks to the demoralization and crisis of the labor movement, the reactionary officials are able to prevent the discontent the ranks of organized labor from crystallizing into action against the bosses.

The Mistake of the Progressives

The progressives by themselves were not able to raise the standard of revolt in spite of the very favorable conditions in this direction, because they were themselves caught in the demoralization and crisis of the labor movement.

The bankruptcy of the Communist Party policy—the abandonment of the unions by the official Communists —liquidated the rank and file left wing and left the membership to the mercy of the reactionary officialdom. This strengthened the reactionaries and greatly weakened the progressives. In withdrawing the militants from the trade unions the Communist Party leadership strengthened the burocracy of the trade unions and left the workers leaderless. Wherever left wing workers were not withdrawn they were forced to carry out policies in the trade unions that isolated and divorced them from the workers and made them ridiculously ineffectual in the trade unions. As a result of the liquidation of the left wing, pessimism grew in the ranks of the organized workers. Even greater demoralization gripped the unions. The progressives were caught in this situation. What they welcomed yesterday as an "opportunity" they will today have to admit was the cause of disaster. The welcoming of the liquidation of the left wing and the failure to recognize its disasterous consequences actually placed the progressives at the mercy of the trade union burocracy.

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In line with the above contentions, let us examine the progressive movement as it is typified in the "Muste movement," the Conference for Progressive Labor Action.

The Nature and Program of the "Muste Movement."

This movement is the expression of the opposition within the trade unions to the reactionary policies and leadership of these unions. It represents a left development in the trade union movement in that it strives to replace the present reactionary policies with a program of immediate demands of which the Communists and the left wing can accept for immediate struggle. Their program includes the following (*Labor Age*, February 1930):

"1. *Emphasis on organization of the unskilled and semi-skilled in the basic industries into industrial unions.*

"2. *Appeal primarily to the militancy and solidarity of the workers, not to the good will of the boss in organizing efforts.*

"3. *Opposition to National Civic Federation influence in the labor movement.*

"4. *Insistence that union membership shall not be denied on grounds of race or political, social, economic or religious views or affiliations.*

"5. *Right of a minority or opposition to function in the movement.*

"6. *Aggressive warfare on injunctions and yellow-dog contracts.*

"7. *Social insurance.*

"8. *Encouragement of cooperative enterprises.*

"9. *Setting forth a new social order as Labor's goal.*

"10. *Working out effective methods of collective bargaining and union control without sacrifice of the union's independence.*

"11. *The 5-day week, higher wages, elimination of overtime and night work.*

"12. *Recognition of Soviet Russia.*

"13. *Making the American labor movement anti-militaristic and anti-imperialistic.*

"14. *Labor Internationalism.*

"15. *Independent labor political action.*

"16. *Development of genuine workers education movement."*

It is clear that in the main this program is acceptable to the Communists and the left wing in the trade unions.

The Communist Party officialdom does not recognize the significance of this movement and conducts the most bitter fight against it as the worst "social-fascist" development in the labor movement. But it is the duty of the Communists in the trade unions to build up the left wing forces in the unions so as to make possible a closer union and possibly an amalgamation of the genuine progressive forces of the Muste movement into the left wing.

The Fruits of Faith in the Burocracy

Faith in the burocracy has not brought any achievements to the progressives and in so far as they have been a check on the development of a militant left wing movement and struggle of the rank and file, they have played a conservative role. The campaign of organization in the South has been dissipated. The Illinois miners development has not turned out as it should have. This recognized in the *Labor Age* (September, 1930):

"Once again we venture to make the point that the Howatt organization has only one excuse for existence, if, namely, it will be a militant, clean progressive organization breaking not only with Lewis but also with Lewisism and going out to organize the unorganized. If it will be that the of seating its delegates at an AF of L convention is for the time being unimportant. If it is not that, but only a new version of the old regime, it deserves to die as it will."

Then came the settlement of the hosiery workers strike upon an acceptance of a 20% wage-cut and the stretchout.

These are sufficient to indicate where the policy of reliance upon the burocracy leads.

The S P and the Progressives

The official Socialist Party has nothing in common with the progressives in the trade unions. It is married to the reactionary burocracy. A definite break with the Socialist Party is inevitable just as soon as the progressives make a clean break with the burocracy. Such elements as James Oneal and J. B. S. Hardman (Salutzky), the errand boy of Sidney Hillman, have no place in a genuine progressive movement.

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What is needed today is a revaluation and a reestimation of forces and situations. Conditions call for a union of all forces in the unions in favor a program of struggle for the workers interests against the bossees and against the reactionary officials and their treacherous policies—for the unification of the organized workers and the unorganized, for the organization of the unorganized.

The unification of all such forces into a movement based on the rank and file, courageous and determined to engage in independent activity for its program—this is the burning need of the hour in the trade unions. In other words the time has come for the union of all forces in a left wing. This is our trade union policy. The official policy of the Communist Party is opposed to this.

The way of the present situation in the trade unions is the union of all fighting militant progressive forces in a left wing—and not their dispersal and rout.

MOVIES

Just Imagine

JUST IMAGINE, with El Brendel, Maureen O'Sullivan, John Garrick, Marjorie White, etc. Story, dialogue and songs by DeSylva, Brown and Henderson. Dances staged by Seymour Felix, Directed by David Butler.

Just Imagine, is a typical example of an extremely poor picture with special trimmings to make it pass. The only good features of the picture are the photography and the splendid interior shots both on earth and on the planet Mars. *Just Imagine* being a musical comedy, I of course did not expect any sense to the picture and in this respect I was not dissappointed. It is the story of a man who died in the year 1930 and was brought to life again in 1980. He then learns all the new and intricate ways of the world. The hero of the story is in love with a girl but another man also loves her and according to the laws of the country the girl is compelled to marry the man who distinguishes himself most. Therefore when the opportunity is presented for the hero to fly to Mars and in this way make a name for himself, he gladly accepts the offer. Being the hero, he of course succeeds in arriving at Mars and when he returns he is greeted by the populace and the court awards the girl to him as his wife. Altho the story is stupid the picture itself is worse. No attempts at details are made. When the rocket arrives at Mars the men rush out of their rocket without first ascertaining just what the atmospheric conditions are. We are shown a scene of Martian dancers before an idol which strangely enough resembles a Buddha and the dancers on Mars also strangely enough are garbed in the latest 1930 fashions of the Broadway night clubs. Every once in a while, and for no reason at all, some of the characters burst forth into song and the singing is atrocious. If you are interested in seeing beautiful photography, very effective shots, and futuristic scenes, then see this picture, provided, however, that you can sit thru a foolish picture for an hour and a half with rotten comedy and even worse singing.

Flicker

MUSTE AT FORUM ON PROGRESSIVES

A. J. Muste will speak at the New Workers School forum on "The Program of the Progressives" this Sunday night, December 14, at 8 P. M.

The following week the forum does its bit for the reception of Dr. Albert Einstein in America by a lecture on "Einstein and Marx" by Will Herberg.

On December 28 Silendra Nath Ghose, Secretary of the Indian Nationalist Congress of America, will lecture on "India and Britain." And on the first Sunday night in January, Bert Wolfe will speak on the "Next War."

The Sunday Night Forum began with a bang last week, with a lecture by Benjamin Gitlow on "The Present Situation in the Labor Movement."

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STUDENTS PLAN BIG SCHOOL DANCE

The Student Council of the New Workers School plans to celebrate the successful Second Year of the institution by a Festival and Dance at its headquarters on Saturday Night, January 10.

The Jazz King (All-Colored) Band is furnishing music for the occasion. The school asks all its friends to join in the celebration. Tickets are 35 cents and can be secured at the school office or from the students.