

The Socialist Party and The Trade Unions

HAIM KANTOROVITCH

BECAUSE, in his union, he had acted contrary to socialist policy, a member of the Socialist Party was brought up on charges. In defense he stated that he had acted according to his socialist conscience and that he had never known that the party had a specific party line according to which comrades in unions must act. As a socialist, he knew that he should utilize every opportunity to attack capitalism, and advocate independent political action. He was not certain about his attitude towards industrial unionism. Some socialists in his local favored it; others opposed it.

In his union, he faced a problem of reactionary, if not corrupt, leadership. These leaders opposed every progressive action and fought against every progressive proposition that arose. They turned inner union democracy into a mockery. Progressive union members, radicals of all kinds, united to fight against this leadership. He was asked to join in this fight, and hesitated. For advice he went to his local socialist leaders. Their answer was as usual, an answer that most of us now know by heart: The Socialist Party is not a Communist Party; we do not want to control unions or dictate to them, nor do we want to mix into their inner affairs.

Yes, argued the comrade, I understand that. But what shall I do in my union now? You see, there are quite a number of socialists in the union. If we would only consent to join the opposition, we could control it; we could give it its tone, a socialist tone. We could even elect socialists instead of reactionaries who now rule the union. If we don't assume the leadership, the communists will. The communists are numerically weaker than we are, and the members of the union would rather follow us, but if we refuse to lead, the com-

The Socialist Party and the Trade Unions

munists will naturally fall heir to the leadership. That will be just as bad for the union as for the socialists.

No, his leaders told him. No, his fellow socialists told him. We don't want to get mixed up with oppositions. That is the tactic of the communists. We don't want to dictate to the unions, or influence their elections, or in any way mix into their inner affairs. As a result the communists took over the leadership and, as usual, made a mess of it. It was easy for the reactionaries to work up a "red scare" and win the elections. Now, the rank and file progressives are disillusioned. All that they retain of their former rebellious mood, is a profound contempt for socialists, "who talk like heroes and act like cowards."

The comrade on trial continued: It is true. I did support the communist ticket. I did not want to do it; I would rather have gone with my fellow socialists. I would have followed them anywhere. But they did not go anywhere, and I had to choose between reactionary politicians or communists. My socialist conscience dictated that I should choose the latter.

What Is Our Policy in the Trade Unions?

A progressive movement is growing in a number of unions. Undoubtedly, it is a good sign. It shows an awakening of class consciousness, or at least, real trade union consciousness among the workers. In most cases, these progressive oppositions are spontaneous revolts against incompetent, reactionary and often corrupt leadership. It fights for a more aggressive, a more progressive unionism; for democracy in the unions; and it often includes a demand for industrial unionism and independent political action. What is the policy of the Socialist Party towards these movements? No one really knows. Individual socialists act as they see fit. One can find socialists active in the opposition groups, and socialists supporting reactionary leaders, in the same local unions. Which of these comrades acts in accordance with the policy of our party?

Let us take a more concrete example: A fight recently took place in the New York Teachers' Union, Local 5, between

The American Socialist Quarterly

the leadership of that local and its left wing. What I know, and probably what all "outsiders" know, is that on the side of the right wing leadership is William Green and his lieutenants; and that on the side of the left wing is, it seems, every progressive man and woman who is at all interested in the fight. The entire fight reduced itself to the effort of the right wing leaders to expel, or, as they politely phrase it, "to get rid of" the left wing members in the union. A great number of socialists were in the Teachers' Union, some right, some left wing. Among the left wingers, there are socialists of national prominence, including a member of the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party.

The *New Leader*, the official organ of the Socialist Party of the state of New York and some other states, in its issue of September 7, 1935, featured an article by Dr. Abraham Lefkowitz, one of the leaders of the right wing of the Teachers' Union and a non-party member. The article is not only a vicious attack upon the left wing, but it also contains very serious charges against prominent members of the party, including Maynard Krueger, a member of the N. E. C.

We will not here stop to consider the ethics of the *New Leader* in allowing a non-party member to publish such serious charges against party members without previously investigating them, and without submitting them to the responsible party committees for action. When some militant comrades, in their fight against racketeering in the unions, published charges against Nemzer, they were declared nothing less than agents of Stalin. Charges against a party member must first be brought before the Grievance Committee, it was argued. When charges are proved, they may then be published. The same attitude, however, was not taken by the *New Leader* in the case of the Teachers' Union. Maynard Krueger may be a member of the National Executive Committee of the party, but he is a left winger. It is, therefore, quite proper for a non-party member to charge him with any action in the official party organ.

In fact the *New Leader* has even violated the principle laid down by its own editor in his capacity as chairman

The Socialist Party and the Trade Unions

of the sub-committee to formulate the trade union policy for the N. Y. State Executive Committee. A draft of this policy appeared in the *New Leader*. In this instance, the party has gone into an intra-union fight in absolute violation of the ruling. There was no question here of racketeering or principle. The *New Leader*, through its editor, and as spokesman for the party, jumped in against the advice of the majority of socialists in the union.

Nor was it a question of exposing communist members, because Oneal in his answer to Norman Thomas expressly stated that he stood by the N. E. C. position on trade unions, which he, Oneal, had also drafted, against expulsion of union members because of political affiliation. The reason he favored expulsion, through charter revocation, in the case of the Teachers' Union was on the ground of disruption and anti-union tactics. Since when has the Socialist Party become the judge of who is, and who is not, a good union member and what is good union tactics, inside a union.

But putting aside this unethical conduct of the *New Leader*, who represents the party policy in this conflict? The militants in the Teachers' Union, or the *New Leader*? If this can not be answered, we are back again where we started: What is the policy of the party in the trade unions?

Our Official Resolutions on the Trade Union Question

In vain will comrades point to the resolutions on trade unionism adopted at every convention. They may be excellent as far as they go, but they never go far enough. The resolutions adopted at our conventions are always general and abstract. They usually reiterate that unions are very important; that we, socialists, are ready to help them in their work of organizing the unorganized, as well as in their fight against their enemies. The resolutions declare that it is the duty of every socialist to join the union of his trade, if there is any; to help organize his trade, if it is unorganized; to help other unions in their struggle against their bosses. It sometimes includes a paragraph about the necessity of industrial

The American Socialist Quarterly

unionism and independent political action. So far, so good. No one will dispute the principles expressed in these resolutions.

Are we satisfied with the unions as they are? Are they, in our opinion, capable of organizing and leading the workers in their economic struggle? Do we approve of the present ideology and strategy of the American Federation of Labor?

Do we believe that the present American Federation of Labor leadership is capable of really leading the American workers to victory? We must give an answer to these questions before we can decide the all-important question of socialist tactics within the union. If, for instance, we believe that the present leadership of the American Federation of Labor is not capable of leading the workers, are we to fight against it, and how? If we believe that the form of organization to which the American Federation of Labor clings is obsolete and has become a fetter to progress, what are we socialist members in the unions to do about it? Shall we fight for a more progressive form of unionism? It is clear that a fight can not be conducted except in an organized manner. An individual member, who has no understanding to act concertedly with other individual members is always powerless. Shall we then organize socialist groups in the unions?

None of these questions is raised or answered in our official resolutions. The resolutions are abstract declarations, but not directives either to our labor committees, or to our members. The result is chaos and confusion. In some unions, socialists unite with communists; in others, with Lovestoneites against Stalinites. At least in one local union, some right-wing socialists united with Stalinites and reactionaries against a progressive administration headed by a Lovestoneite, while militant socialists in the same local united with the Lovestoneites in defense of the administration. The net result is not only chaos and confusion in our own ranks, but the party itself is placed in a ridiculous position in the eyes of the workers.

The Socialist Party and the Trade Unions

A False and Dangerous Policy

Unofficially, however, there really is quite a well-defined policy for socialists in the unions. This policy has never clearly been formulated in official resolutions because it is taken for granted. It may not be acceptable to all socialists, but it is clearly adhered to by a very important section of the party—by the entire right wing. One always finds it expressed in the writings and speeches of the old guard of the party.

This policy was clearly and effectively expressed at a socialist meeting, by a former chairman of the New York Labor Committee. We are, he said, with organized labor, right or wrong. We don't tell labor what to do nor how to do it. We help them in whatever they do. He was applauded. It sounded nice. We are with labor . . . we help labor. A moment's reflection, however, is enough to learn that this "theory" is both false and dangerous.

It is not true that we are with labor right or wrong. We are with labor only when it is right. When labor endorses the Democratic Party, we are against it. When labor is out red-witch hunting, we are against it. When labor insists on clinging to an old and obsolete form of organization, we are against it. The reader will, of course, say we are mistaken. We confuse labor with labor leaders. He will say, labor really does not endorse the Democratic Party; labor leaders do. That is true. But we are not mistaken. In practice, those who proclaim that they are with labor right or wrong, are really with the labor leaders, right or wrong, whoever they may happen to be—very often with the labor leaders against the rank and file.

At the last convention of the party in Detroit, the resolution on the N R A contained a paragraph very mildly critical of the present leadership of the American Federation of Labor. How scared the right-wing leaders and delegates were! How bitterly they fought against it! What did that paragraph contain? It stated that the obsolete ideology of the American Federation of Labor had become harmful and that its archaic form of organization was out of tune with con-

The American Socialist Quarterly

temporary industrial conditions. These are not the exact words, but the thought is exact.

Were those who so bitterly fought the resolution afraid that the masses of workers in the American Federation of Labor would feel insulted by our resolution? Of course not. No one mentioned the masses in the debate. It was the fear that the leaders of the American Federation of Labor would feel insulted and that their friendship would be lost. Whether or not we have this friendship, is debatable. At best, the friends of the Socialist Party among the Federation of Labor leaders can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Furthermore, a friendship that can not stand even such mild criticism, is not worth much. Sooner or later some socialist will say something that these leaders will not like, and the friendship will come to an end. Yet, the attitude of "we are with labor right or wrong" is held by a very important section of the party. And what is the result? The party has not made any headway in the trade union movement. It does not influence it in the least. To the broad masses in the unions, we are the eternal supporters of the leadership; to the leadership, we are nothing at all.

As a result of this attitude, there is hardly ever any criticism of the trade union movement in our party press. Of course, we do not share the communist view that every trade union leader is a faker just because he is a leader; and that every trade union administration is a racket. We know that there are plenty of honest and efficient labor leaders, as well as honest and efficient trade unions and trade union administrations. But, we also know that there are plenty of dishonest leaders for whom the union has become a private racket. There is no use denying, and it can not be denied, that many a union is nothing but a misuse of the name. Reaction and racketeering in the trade unions has become the greatest menace to the labor movement. President Green has admitted it more than once, but, of course, has done nothing about it. Neither have we. We feature President Green's articles in our press, but we keep quiet when he joins Hearst in a red-hunting campaign—and for Green as well as for

The Socialist Party and the Trade Unions

Hearst, a "Red" is one who happens to disagree with him. We keep quiet, because after all, "we are with labor right or wrong." Just because it happened to be more wrong than right during the last few decades, does not matter. We are with labor right or wrong.

Socialism and Trade Unionism

The attitude of socialists towards trade unions is determined in the long run by their attitude towards socialism. The attitude towards the trade unions, which we discussed above, is the logical outcome of the purely parliamentary view of socialism. The purely parliamentary socialist believes that the victory of socialism will be purely political. Socialism will be voted in; all we need is a majority of votes. When votes are counted, no one thinks, or cares, about who may have cast them. Whether socialists will get a majority of votes one way or another, does not really matter. If the majority will in itself contain a majority of non-socialist votes, does not matter either. Once we have a socialist president in the White House and a majority in both houses, we shall decree socialism by law.

We will not discuss this view of socialism. We have done it often enough. Furthermore, history has done it in an even more effective manner in some of the European countries. However, it is clear that once one accepts this view, his entire strategy will be devoted to the getting of votes, no matter how.

There is no doubt that the trade union movement is a favorable field for socialist activity. Trade union members have already had a taste of workers' organization, and are more conscious of the significance of the class struggle than other workers. Socialist activities in the unions for the purely parliamentary socialist, however, means nothing but getting the political endorsement of a union. If our unions were really democratic bodies where the masses decided whether to endorse this or that party, the socialists would naturally be compelled to appeal to these masses and to rely upon them.

Unfortunately, this is not the case, or at least, very

The American Socialist Quarterly

rarely so. The trade union movement as it is today, is largely a matter of leadership. It is the leaders who decide. The rank and file is quite indifferent to these political endorsements. This indifference is sometimes interpreted as acquiescence. But it really is not. The fact that the American Federation of Labor, or any of its local bodies, endorses this or that political party or candidate, may be important as a means of propaganda, but it does not mean that the membership feels obligated to vote for the endorsed candidate or party. The American Federation of Labor actually has very little political influence over its members. However, the vote-getting socialist chooses the path of least resistance. It is easier to gain favor—at least with some leaders—by being “good”, refraining from criticism and proclaiming that we are “with labor (i.e., labor leaders) right or wrong,” than to try to tear the masses away from under the non-socialist influence of these same leaders.

Militant socialists can not accept this point of view. When they are accused of De Leonism, or of wanting to use communist tactics in the trade unions, it is not the truth, of course. These accusations of De Leonism and communism are hurled at any one who dares to criticise anything in the existing trade union movement or its leadership. Militant socialists have always fought against dual unionism. When the communists attempted to gain control over the trade unions in order to make them an appendix to their political party, they met with the bitter opposition of all militant socialists. The accusation that the militant socialists are De Leonites or accept the communist tactics, has fully as much foundation in fact as all other kinds of red-baiting. That certain socialists should resort to these cheap tactics of red-baiting in order to discredit other socialists who have differed with them, is of course very unfortunate.

However, it is not the most unfortunate feature of the Socialist Party at present. The militant socialist has a two-fold interest in the trade union movement. He is interested in the trade union as such. If, together with other progressive elements in the unions, he is ready to join in a fight for a more

The Socialist Party and the Trade Unions

efficient, a more democratic, better and cleaner union, it is not because he is eager to gain control of it, but because he is convinced that most of our trade unions, as they are now, are incapable of performing the tasks which they assigned to themselves. In other words, he is interested in making the union a better union.

This is not, however, the sole interest of the militant socialist in the trade union movement. He does not believe that socialism is a purely parliamentary affair; that it will simply be voted in and consequently, that it does not matter how one gets the votes as long as one gets them. The militant socialist realizes that socialism will be achieved as the result of hard struggles, in which the trade union movement, as the economic force of the working class, will have to play a very important role—perhaps, even the decisive role. When the time for this decisive struggle comes, a trade union movement controlled by reactionary elements may turn out to be a force for reaction and against socialism. It would not be surprising if William Green and Matthew Woll would organize a political labor party to fight the “red menace”. Some socialists erroneously believe that Green’s campaign against communism in the unions is, and never will be other than, an anti-communist campaign. This, however, is a mistake. Those who are active in unions not only as good boys, but as socialists, know that they may expect the same treatment that communists now get. The best example is the Teachers’ Union. The leaders of the right wing in this union make no distinction between socialists and communists, unless of course, it is the kind of socialist from whom leaders—no matter how reactionary—have nothing to fear.

The socialist press and socialist speakers often emphasize the fact that the socialist movement in America will not amount to anything if it does not get the full support of the trade union movement. Every one will agree. But the way to get it is not by playing up to the leadership of the union, but by influencing the masses of trade-union workers in the direction of socialism. This is not only a difficult task, but a task which the majority of trade union leaders very much

The American Socialist Quarterly

dislike. It will have to be done, however, despite these leaders. Our slogan must be: To the workers instead of to the leaders.

The task of winning the trade union masses for socialism cannot be left to the unplanned and unorganized activities of individual members. If the party will undertake this all-important task seriously, it will have to map out a systematic plan of how to organize and direct this work. A start was made in New York through the organization of socialist leagues in the unions. Under the able leadership of Jack Altman, these leagues had begun to develop and were about to become a force in the trade union movement; a force for a more progressive unionism, as well as for socialism, but, by no means for outside control of the unions or for party dictatorship within the unions. Unfortunately, the New York Labor Committee that did this work was dissolved. The new committee which was appointed succeeded in practically killing these leagues.

At the next national convention of the party, the trade union problem will have to be dealt with more seriously and in greater detail than at former conventions. The present situation is so chaotic and confused that it has become a danger to the party. The party can not again content itself merely with adopting a general and abstract trade union resolution. It must work out a policy for planned and organized work within the trade unions—a policy to be followed by all party members.

ONLY ONE DOLLAR FOR ONE YEAR.

SEND FOR BUNDLE ORDERS

AT SPECIAL RATES