Marxists and the Unions

by Jay Lovestone

(We present below, as discussion material, additional sections of Jay Lovestone's political report to the recent session of the National Council of the I.C.L.L. Other sections appeared in an article last week.

—THE EDITOR.)

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I CANNOT emphasize too much in an examination of our political approach or in a revalutation of our political approach, the need for us to reverse the current and to change the direction of relationship between radicals and the labor movement as a whole. This involves a complete break with the "commissarship" psychology inherited from the Comintern, a complete break with the notion that we have the plan, the patent, the monopoly, just what the labor movement needs to be a "real" labor movement. We do not create the labor movement; the labor movement provides the soil and supplies the life for the roots of our movement as a radical movement within it.

I might remind you of the advice given by Marx and Engels to the old German socialists in this country, warning them against trying to create the labor movement in their own image and against imposing on the developing labor movement their own ideas, urging them not to judge the labor movement by any of their own preconceived ideas. This advice is still thoroly sound.

I believe all of us have suffered from this "commissarship" psychology but we, in recent years, have begun to break with this approach.

I propose that we should consider the relationship between us and the developing labor movement from such an angle rather than from the one of looking down, superimposing, offering ourselves as the leaders instead of seeking to grow up with it and, being equipped with a certain type of understanding, therefore being able more easily to bring clarity and supply leadership to it, to win leadership in it.

The "Periphery" System

I think we should consider throwing completely overboard another organizational notion that we inherited in a sense from the Russian experience, and that is the practise of creating special organizations the moment some issue arises in the class struggle, instead of working with and thru existing labor organizations. I now speak of the so-called "periphery" organizations.

Or take the curse of "conferencitis." Whatever happens or doesn't happen—call a conference. And, if you don't have an organization that will send delegates, you have delegates who will call themselves organizations. And usually it means that you simply give instructions to party-controlled organizations to send a delegate, regardless of the needs of that organization.

Now I can very readily understand why it was a sound practise for the Russians, especially immediately after the overthrow of Czarism, to call conferences and set up all sorts of organizations. In Russia, prior to the revolution, the extent of organization among the workers was very small, the proportion of the working class of Russia, even for its size, which had experience in self-rule, in workers democracy in its most limited form, in actual organization of class institutions, was very small in comparison with what we have in this country or Germany had at one time or England or France.

I think, given the revolution, with the Bolshevik party at the helm, it was one means of educational experience for the workers in labor organization. But I think those reasons do not hold sufficiently here for us mechanically to comply and carry over those methods of organization.

Let The Trade Unions Act

As a matter of fact, they hurt the movement and waste its energies. Take the trade-union movement today. Why should we not fight for workers rights, the right to organize, unemployment relief and the like thru the existing trade unions? There are about seven million workers organized, primarily for economic purposes, but laying the basis for a real movement on these issues as well. Why not try to add vitality to this movement by getting it into the actual political struggles of today?

But what happens with most "conferences" and "periphery" organizations is that they do not stimulate the activity of the unions but devitalize and replace them, making them into no more than blotters and auxiliaries.

Suppose we are automobile workers who have a year or two of experience in trade unionism. We find ourselves now in a situation where we have lost our jobs. We begin to say that the union used to be all right when we were working; it helped us then but apparently it was a short-time proposition—it can't even help us hold our jobs today, let alone get wage increases. Why should I pay dues to the union? Now these fellows I met yesterday from the Workers Alliance, they're different. They're just for us without jobs. They invited me to the hall; they charge me practically nothing for dues and they're going to do the thing for me instead of the union.

You know the rest of the story.

The problem here is to get the unions themselves, as such, to take up the fight for unemployment relief, to defend the interests of their members when they are jobless as well as when they have work. I don't want to make any sweeping generalizations but I think that, for the present, we can say our slogan should be: Everything in and thru the unions!

Party And Union

Or take the question of the relation of party to trade union. We have had very serious quarrels with the Communist Party and with sections of the Socialist Party—they suffered from the same disease of domination and mechanical control of the trade unions, of considering them reserves for party emergencies and fields for exploitation. Let me say that, altho we have always rejected and resisted this approach, yet, in some cases, we too have had a mechanical approach on relations with the unions.

We most emphatically reject the notion that the trade unions can or should be an appendage to, and auxiliary of, any political party.

The Communist Party, even tho it has changed its routine procedure of working in the trade unions, still has the basically unsound attitude towards the trade-union movement as an auxiliary, subsidiary, secondary movement. The remarks by Comrade Miles as to the situation in Flint have much more import than the figures would reveal. The Communist Party in the auto Union, until we stepped in and stopped it, was misusing and milking that organization in the most shameful manner. It was really a form of Stalinist racketeering!

I don't think we need spend too much time on the question of our own attitude toward the trade unions. The prestige of our organization for our work in the trade unions is far greater than we ourselves realize. If we have succeeded in anything, it is in working out a sound trade-union theory and in developing sound relations between the class-conscious radicals in the unions and the movement as a whole. But there are still many ideas and practises that we should examine critically and discard if necessary.

Our Aim And Perspective

What is our perspective and aim? What kind of movement do we want to develop with our group? We strive today to be a kernel for the crystallization and emergence of a new phase of revolutionary socialism, of a new radicalism, if I may use that term. Who else can it be in this country today?

Politically, who else can it be? Can it be the Communist Party? Why, it is part of the government machinery. It is a direct menace to working-class interests in this country. The Trotskyites? They suffer as much from the "Russian orientation," they are as little genuinely a part of the American labor movement, as the Stalinists. Like the Stalinists, they are an offshoot or appendage to a Russian political faction, not a part of the American labor movement. The Socialist Party? Some sound elements there are but the party as a whole, it seems to me, cannot fulfill that function.

What are we aiming at? We are not aiming at establishing a rival labor movement, either economic or political. We do not look at things from outside in. We are striving to become an energizing leavening, guiding force within the labor movement, bringing to it socialist clarity and understanding. Whatever tasks the working class has to accomplish in this country

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comrades responded. If we expect to take the lead in the revolutionary movement, we must be able to make our own responses and we must have discussions and discussions and more discussions.

Anti-War Group Is Set Up In L.A.

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committees in order to build up a national anti-war movement.

The Socialist Party and the Los Angeles branch of the Independent Communist Labor League have affiliated with this committee and both organizations are participating actively in its work.

The names and affiliations of the members of the executive committee and the Labor Committee indicate the scope of the movement—Executive Committee: John Thurber, Socialist Party, chairman; Fay Bennett, district organizer, American Students Union; Paul Berg, I.L.G.W.U.; Henry Donath, church groups; Harold Hull, Los Angeles Peace Council; Earl Lane, I.C.L.L.; Ethelwyn Mills, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom; David Price, American Newspaper Guild.

Labor Committee: Earl Lane, I.C.L.L., chairman; W. Barash, Furriers Union; Paul Berg, I.L.G.W.U.; David Price, American Newspaper Guild; Emma Lane, U.O.P.W.A.; Wm. Seligman, United Shoe Workers of America; Rose Seligman, I.L.G.W.U.; John Thurber, S.P.

Headquarters of the committee are at 553 South Western Avenue, Room 227. All those who wish to participate in the anti-war struggle should communicate with this office.

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