

Some Trade Union Problems

By JAY LOVESTONE

(The following article is part of a speech delivered by Comrade Lovestone in the discussion on the trade union report at the Fifth National Convention of the Workers Party.)

COMRADE DELEGATES: I propose to deal with some basic questions and some basic experiences of our Party in the past two years.

Nobody will deny that one of the basic problems of our Party is to deepen the struggles on the economic field. Nobody in this convention questions that. There is no disagreement in this convention over this matter. We may disagree in a particular instance as to the approach towards realizing this purpose, but there is no disagreement among us about the necessity of revolutionizing the labor movement and of giving a greater and deeper basis, a political basis, to all these struggles.

I propose to deal with two main questions and then try to take up some of the experiences discussed by Comrade Foster.

What is the outlook in the trade unions for the development of class struggle? Comrade Foster said that the report of the Political Bureau very properly concluded that an economic recession has set in. There is as yet no deep depression: it would be equally wrong to say that the deep depression will not come within the following months. What is the logic of this? What conclusions are we to draw?

THE SHARPENING ECONOMIC STRUGGLE

It is our contention that because of this very economic recession there will be an increase in the number of strikes, there will be a sharpening of the economic struggles. The problem for us is the following: How can we translate the sharpening of these struggles, the increase in the number of strikes, into organizational values and into organizational strength for the labor movement?

Those of us who will analyze the history of the American trade union movement will find that it is during periods of economic prosperity that the trade union movement gains its greatest strength.

Yet, here we have had in the last two years a situation in which we had as high a point of prosperity in America as ever before, and still there was no increase in the membership of the trade unions.

What is the cause of this? We face here a basic question. Why is it that contrary to all the evidence of the history of the American trade union movement in previous years, in the period of economic prosperity, there has not only *not* been an increase in the membership of the trade unions, but actually there there has been a decrease? The only increase the American Federation of Labor had last year was the Passaic textile workers brought into the A. F. of L. over the heads of Green and Woll and not with their help. Why is it? It is my contention that there are three basic causes for this exception to the ordinary, normal experience of the American trade union movement.

WHY THE UNIONS DO NOT GROW

The basic reasons for the trade union movement, in this period of economic prosperity, not having gained in numbers, as it did in previous periods of this character, are the following:

(a) First, the role of the government today. The American government has never been a "government of the workers, by the workers and for the workers," but never before was the United States government so vicious, so brutal, so openly a strike-breaking government as it is today.

(b) Secondly, the labor leaders of this country have never as a class been progressive. There have been exceptions. There were times when the old Gompers spoke of the need of abolishing capitalism. There was a time when there was a strong progressive movement in the miners' ranks, a progressive movement which dominated to a large extent the official life, the strategy, the ideology of the miners. That is gone. Today we have a different situation. *There is a close union of the bureaucracy with the employers.* The bureaucracy in the trade union movement today is not merely non-progressive. The bureaucracy in the trade union movement today is the spearhead of the exploiting class in the ranks of the proletariat. This union, this unity, this developing class collaboration leadership, developing complete union, I should say, of the bureaucracy with the employers, is another basic cause for the stagnation of the trade unions during a period most favorable for a gain in membership.

(c) The third basic factor; the present methods and tactics of the

employers. Today the employers, as Comrade Foster has correctly stated, have developed a whole system of counteracting the movement for the organization of the workers. When I speak of the employers, I do not forget their agents in the ranks of the labor movement. I do not forget the theory worked out by Woll. I do not forget the \$200,000 appropriation at the last American Federation of Labor Convention to study company unionism and the report to be written by Mr. Woll. In fact, Mr. Woll had the basis of the report written before the \$200,000 were appropriated. Don't ask us why he wanted \$200,000. (*Laughter.*) This report says the objective of the trade unions is to become organizations which will supply efficient, obedient, disciplined workers, who can produce so much that the employers will be able to afford to give them such a decent living that they won't even have to strike or fight for it!

These three are the outstanding factors responsible for the trade union movement not gaining in membership, not gaining in strength organizationally in a period most favorable for such progress. Our Party must develop such trade union tactics and programs as will enable it to overcome to a large degree these objective obstacles.

A second basic point: We must be able not only to deepen our trade union struggles, but we must be able to inject into the political situation those issues which of and by themselves, when treated in the narrowest sense, are so-called "trade union issues."

For instance, Mr. Coolidge has decided that he does not "choose to run." The class which owns Coolidge, the class which Mr. Coolidge serves, may decide he should choose to run. Then Coolidge will run and he will run faster than ever to the White House, because once that class decides he should run, they will put their foot down on any opposition to his not getting home in the White House. If Coolidge runs, or another strike-breaker, like Dawes, runs, or this liberal governor of the liberal state of Ohio, Governor Donahey, who is responsible for and on whose hands is the blood of innocent defenseless locked-out miners, who is responsible for the persecution of all the miners who are being starved—or let us say Fuller, the governor who murdered Sacco and Vanzetti—if any of these run, we must be ready in the trade unions to talk of the political meaning of the nomination in terms of trade union issues. Massachusetts has given many valuable lackeys to the exploiting class of this country. In this respect, Massachusetts runs neck and neck with Ohio. This gentleman from Ohio, we must remember,

is a liberal. He believes in freedom of speech for the employers; he believes in freedom of assemblage for the workers when they stay at home. He may run.

Particularly these issues should be brought into the trade unions. We can politicalize the trade unions. We can inject certain issues that will appeal to the most conservative trade unionists in our campaigns. Such issues as "Why not have the right to organize?"

We have spoken of the trade union bureaucrats. When we speak of the trade union bureaucracy, do not look at Woll, look at the forces behind Woll. When you speak of Green, do not look at Green only, look at the organization from which he hails, look at the masses. These bureaucrats know how to respond to masses, because if they didn't know how to respond to them, they would not know how to do some of the dastardly work they have done in controlling those masses for long periods of years.

THE RIGHT TO ORGANIZE AND THE RIGHT TO STRIKE

The right to organize must be made a major issue for the workers and therefore a political issue directly proportional to the extent these bureaucrats go to the right.

The question of injunctions, the right to strike, must be emphasized in 1928. Whoever runs on either of the major Party tickets—Coolidge, Dawes, Donahey or some other servile tool of the ruling class of this country, we, the Party, must through our trade union apparatus, through our whole trade union machinery in the next election campaign, introduce such issues as will mobilize the masses for the sharpest struggle against the employers. Therefore the trade union work of the Party is basic and vital.

Comrade Foster has dealt very briefly with the building trades situation. It is my conviction that the building trades situation at present is a key to the next stage of the struggle. If you examine the history of the trade union movement you will find that, frequently, national general open shop offensives have been launched with an attack either on the building trades or the textile workers as a prelude. You might say, why against them both at the same time? The textile workers are among the lowest paid and the building workers the highest paid. This seeming contradiction is not a contradiction. It is a reality. Because the building trades are among the highest paid, the moment there are signs of recession in the building trades (which is a key to the prosperity maintained

in this country, to the extent we can call it prosperity, for the past two years)—we have increasing signs of an attack on the building trades workers. This State Investigating Commission they have been having in New York, this Legislative Commission to investigate standards in the building trades, is not in any sense a commission to investigate standards; it is a commission to hand down a report which will say the workers in the building trades are overpaid; it is a commission that will enable the capitalist press to come out with propaganda more effectively than before, to say the building trades are robbing the public; it aims to mobilize the "public" against the building trades workers who will resist the next attack upon them.

THE OPEN SHOP OFFENSIVE

And if these experiences and lessons from the history of our class struggle are not to be laid aside, the impending attack on the building trades union is a signal for us, a storm signal, that an attack of the open shop now is being prepared for an offensive along the whole front.

It is true the employers don't always accept even company unions. The General Motors doesn't think of giving even a company union to their workers. Even a company union is revolutionary to General Motors. They will not make the slightest concession to recognize the workers or give them the right to assemble in halls—even these collective bargaining schemes, these class collaboration schemes of Woll, Green and Company, will be wiped out in an open shop offensive.

The Party must work out such programs as will enable us to respond to these needs of the workers, and mobilize them for struggle in the next few months.

THE MINERS' STRUGGLE

Regarding our coal campaign—the importance of the Party's campaign in the mining industry can never be overestimated. It is the Miners' Union that has given us the President of the A. F. of L.; that has been the backbone of loyalty in the A. F. of L. Today the Miners' Union represents the greatest aggregation of true proletarians in the A. F. of L.

Our Party has been the driving force in the campaign of the progressives, of the left wing, in the miners' struggle. Have we made any mistakes? We have made mistakes. Those mistakes are

primarily of two sorts—first, of an organizational character, secondly of an overestimation on our part of our resources to meet so big a task. I don't want to say the Party should not have tackled it, but I think some of us overestimated our strength in the miners' organizaion and the strength of our fractions. It is true we can criticize our fractions in Illinois, even in Pittsburgh, and also in the Anthracite work. But, comrades, this was the first time in the history of our Party that our trade union fractions were called upon to function as fractions, as real agencies of leadership of non-Communist masses, in the basic union of the A. F. of L. And then Lewis! There is no worse gangster in the entire A. F. of L. than Lewis. Sigman will have to learn the A B C of reaction from Lewis. There is no worse parasite infesting the labor movement than this man Lewis. In the face of such organized reaction, I say, on the whole our comrades have done well.

THE STRUGGLE IN THE ANTHRACITE

What about the Anthracite situation? If, firstly, you can compare the number of votes cast by the progressives in the Anthracite with the number of Party members we have; secondly, if you take into consideration the fact that the Anthracite has been the strongest base of reaction in the United Mine Workers; thirdly, if you take into consideration the fact that among the Anthracite miners in our Party we have the lowest proportion of native American elements, to lead those miners against a very high proportion of organized, skilled fakers who have opposed every radical measure in recent years—I say, the comrades in the Anthracite did a splendid job, all their mistakes to the contrary notwithstanding.

Southern Illinois: We had here a more favorable objective situation. We had more American elements in our Party, and more progressive forces to lead the workers. Yet in southern Illinois, with all these favorable circumstances, our Party fraction fell down even in face of a situation where there was a split between Farrington and Lewis, and Farrington was driven out of the organization. Yet, suppose these errors were made. The comrades of southern Illinois are not to be condemned. They are to be helped to organize more effective fractions.

COMMUNISTS AND PROGRESSIVES

Comrade Foster raises an issue of having clear points of distinction between progressives and ourselves. He is correct when

he says it is not always easy to distinguish ourselves clearly from them. I think we can make a united front with progressives sometimes from the top to get the grip on the bottom and in order to give sufficient encouragement to the timid left wing at the very bottom. Once the timid left wing forces see certain progressive leaders, even so-called progressive leaders, moving forward one inch, they will leap yards forward. We must be adroit, skilled, careful in our strategy and in our tactics.

We have three stages, three points of demarcation in our dealings with the progressives at this time in the United States. First of all, we must find the progressives with whom to unite. It is very easy to say: "Progressives, progressives!" We have a very hard time to *find* progressives with whom to unite. Once we find them, we must learn how to hold them, how to work with them. It is easy to say the bureaucrats are crooks and fakers. We have done too much of that. We must criticize them, but we must learn how to criticize them concretely and in a fool-proof manner. The third stage is to learn not only how to work with the progressives, but how to break with them, if necessary, in such a way as to take the masses away from them. We should not put so much emphasis at this time, today, on breaking with progressives when we are still in our infants' clothes, trying to find progressives with whom to unite.

I have no objection to breaking with progressives, if and when necessary, or to making ourselves clear and distinct from them. Not only this. I say we must more than ever before make our position clear and distinct from progressives, but in such a way as will not repel progressives from us. I confess that in many of our activities, not only trade union activities, but activities for the labor party and in other united fronts, we have broken with progressives when justified, but the manner of the break was a disastrous one. That we must avoid in the future.

THE RAILWAY WORKERS

About the railroads: I fully agree with the importance attached to this question by Comrade Foster. But in speaking of railroads we must avoid one error. Do not speak of the railroad workers as a homogeneous mass. There are hundreds of thousands of unskilled workers on the railroads and our Party can approach these unskilled and semi-skilled workers much more easily. Comrade

Foster spoke of the Watson-Parker law. Let no one come here and say that because I am going to quote a reactionary of the worst calibre in the trade union movement, I base myself on the labor fakers. I am going to quote President Sheppard of the Railway Conductors, who has issued a slogan—"Down with Arbitration." When Sheppard, who is an honorary chairman of the National Civic Federation, is compelled to issue a slogan, "Down with Arbitration," then I say, down in the depths of the rank and file of the Railway Conductors there is something brewing. When Sheppard is compelled by the mass pressure from below to say "Down with Arbitration" then the Watson-Parker Law has gone a long way towards getting its teeth knocked out, insofar as it contains any capacity to hurt us by taking away from us masses of workers. It is still a most dangerous piece of legislation on the books against us; but our Party must not be blind to these remarks and policies of the Sheppards, not because it is Sheppard, but because it is the interests of the workers which are involved and which the Sheppards have betrayed. Therefore the situation is favorable for us at this time in this respect.

THE RUBBER WORKERS

A few words about rubber: At Akron, did we have a failure? No, we had a setback. The struggle in Akron is far from over. Have we made mistakes in Akron? Of course. We have made mistakes in the needle trades, in Passaic also. But the policy of the Central Executive Committee for Akron has been and is correct, as Foster says. Comrade Foster cannot point to a single instance where Amter violated any instructions of the C. E. C.

Comrade Foster, I think, was guilty of an unfortunate slip of the tongue when he said Americans are notoriously difficult to organize. I beg to differ with that. If you will look at the unorganized, you will see that it is not so.

What about the Americans? Are they notoriously difficult to organize? If we examine the trade unions, we find it may be harder at certain times to organize the Americans, but once they are organized, they stay organized; they stay organized a long time, not because of Anglo-Saxon supremacy, but because of the experience they have had. I have no admiration for Anglo-Saxon "supremacy," and I do not admire those who condemn the foreign-born. The foreign-born workers are earnest fighters, but much

more difficult to organize. Certain Americans it is very difficult to organize and in Akron we had these Americans whom it is difficult to organize. You will have to learn how not to view any event merely as a mistake but to discuss, and analyze, and not to jump at conclusions without examining the specific issues. When you learn that, you will be nearer the achievement of a correct trade union policy.

What kind of Americans have we in Akron? They come from that section of America where a trade union is an outlaw organization. They are largely Americans from the south—Foster says they are Klansmen—and this means that they have a reactionary ideology. Secondly, the workers in Akron have had a history of bitter and degrading defeats. These defeats have not yet been erased from their memory. It is difficult to organize the steel workers. The history of the defeats of the steel workers, and Foster knows that better than any one of us, is a serious obstacle to our organizing them. The strategy and skill of the employers in Akron were never adequately taken into consideration by the entire Political Committee when we got into the campaign. Amter, with all the errors he has made, and we do not deny it, and the Political Bureau sustained Comrade Foster when he criticized Comrade Amter—Amter has made a contribution to the Party's campaign of organizing the unorganized when he, single-handed and without help, with repeated appeals to the Political Committee to send him American elements, which we couldn't do because we didn't have them available, made a contribution. If we want such contributions, don't demand condemnation of those comrades, because that will discourage comrades and not encourage or inspire them.

THE PASSAIC TEXTILE STRIKE

To be brief about Passaic: The significant thing about Passaic is that it came at a time, it was a struggle at a time, when no struggles were in sight—at a time when reaction was sweeping the trade union movement—at a time of no strikes. Passaic has certain lessons aside from this. I will not analyze, but enumerate them. What was the real contribution of Passaic to the American trade union movement and what is its source of pride for every Communist? It is in the following six points:

1. In Passaic, we fought a struggle for elementary, basic demands in such a way as to point out the real role of the government,

not only the local, county government, not only the village constables, but down to or up to President Coolidge—you can take your choice of directions.

2. In Passaic we learned to utilize class divisions among the bourgeois; we injected the question of tariff in textiles.

3. Our propaganda in Passaic was concrete and dramatized. The trouble with our Party propaganda is largely that we talk above the heads of the workers, or at them; we seldom talk *to* the workers. In Passaic we talked to them with moving pictures, with helmets, with armored cars; and they know that language, because they have been through the hell of the struggle. And I tell you that when we say the poor workers are oppressed, we can say it a thousand times and our faint voice is drowned by the bellowing voice of the bourgeois press which says everything is well. But in Passaic we not only said the workers were weak and sick, but we gave facts and figures of investigations by an authoritative workers' health agency. This also was a contribution to the struggle of the workers in the United States. I read such facts and figures in the reactionary trade union papers, purchased and owned and financed by the employers, and even these black sheets were compelled to publish on the front page these findings of Passaic.

4. We utilized skilfully the role of the women and children in the class struggle. And they have a role. In Passaic we showed how to draw them into a struggle so that the struggle for an increase in wages, the struggle for the right to belong even to that conservative union, the United Textile Workers, was also their struggle, and the women had a big place there.

5. The struggle was not a struggle of Passaic alone. It was a class struggle, in which the workers in many cities of the United States were mobilized in the form of relief conferences for Passaic. If we could have learned to do that with the needle trades, if we could have learned to do that in the miners' struggle (I speak uncritically, and in a constructive spirit), if our Party could have learned to apply this strategy in the miners' union, we would be further ahead.

6. Last, but not least, in Passaic we followed in a model way the policy of bringing unorganized workers into the main stream of the labor movement.

We made mistakes in certain dealings with reactionaries, at certain specific moments in not criticizing sharply enough the bureau-

crats. But these mistakes, I say, fade into the background, when you compare these six contributions to strike strategy in the United States.

THE TRADE UNION EDUCATIONAL LEAGUE

On the Trade Union Educational League we are today much clearer and have a much better understanding and have had our errors corrected in our attitude towards the T. U. E. L.

Who would dare come today with a T. U. E. L. program, in which there was a demand for the proletarian dictatorship? We realize we speak of today, and the present dark conditions for us in the labor movement, when the reactionary leadership have the trade unions hamstrung, are trying moments for us. Who would come today and advocate the inclusion of a proletarian dictatorship clause in the T. U. E. L. program? We would propose to the left wing that it should "water down" the program a little if it had the "dictatorship" in it.

Nobody would come today to say there is no room for the T. U. E. L. and that there is no distinction between left wing and progressive.

The T. U. E. L. has had three stages of development:

1. Comrade Foster was very correct when he said that when the T. U. E. L. was first organized we had the railroad amalgamation committees. When the T. U. E. L. was first organized, it had a splendid approach, but something happened between that first splendid approach and the new, revised, splendid approach of today. It is partly correct to say the Federated Farmer Labor Party came between. The La Follette movement came between these two periods of the T. U. E. L.'s life. These made a very deep impression on all of us. Some of us reacted one way; others another way. I say our Party, as a result of the defeat of the La Follette movement at the hands of the big bourgeoisie in 1924,—that the majority of our Party at this time swung mechanically, and too mechanically, to the left and became narrower. Nobody will deny that today. All of us, in varying degrees, did that. In the combination of several left wing papers into one, we had a mistaken reaction to the temporary collapse of this big basic movement toward the left. The La Follette movement was a movement toward the left. Its defeat caused in us reactions which were further causes for the weakening of the T. U. E. L.

The Party has grown out of this, the second period. We have a new period where we are realists regarding the T. U. E. L. The T. U. E. L. must emphasize not only the immediate aims, not only the question of a labor party, but at this moment more than ever before, in the face of the danger of war, must emphasize the question of international trade union unity. We have not said enough about that question, particularly on the break-up of the Anglo-Russian committee, on the swing to the right at Amsterdam, on the sharpening of hostilities between Amsterdam and the Red International of Labor Unions. Our Party in America must adapt itself to its own specific conditions and emphasize international trade union unity.

In no other phase of our Party work is factionalism as criminal as in the trade union work. I ask you comrades under no circumstances to inject factional prejudices or concepts in this work. If in this basic work we come forward with perverted, with prejudiced ideas, we will have no basis in this country to lead the workers towards Communism.



A CORRECTION

The statement of page 372 of the last issue of *THE COMMUNIST*, in the article on the Conference of the Pan-American Federation of Labor in Washington, that "The substitute resolution was accepted without a dissenting vote. (Only Martinez and Nicaragua abstained)" is incorrect.

Only Martinez voted against this substitute resolution.

ARNOLD ROLLER.