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Why a Labor Party?

By John Pepper

DISCUSSING the question of whether the Workers (Communist) Party should propagate a Labor Party, Comrade Bittelman wrote in *The DAILY WORKER* on November 15, 1924:

"If it were true that the Communists and their Party were so much impossible that the masses will not turn to them for leadership even in the hour of bitter need and in the absence of any other leadership, then. . . Well, then the only thing that the American labor movement could do would be to form immediately one general universal grave-diggers' association, and begin digging one fraternal grave for the entire working class."

A Communist deals dialectically with all questions confronting him. We can not and must not make an exception in considering the question of the formation of a Labor Party. The guiding light in our consideration is Marxism.

What connection has it with Marxism, or even with ordinary common sense, when one says that if the proletariat does not at once accept the leadership of the Communists, it can commit suicide? The acceptance of Communist leadership by the proletarian masses is a matter that depends entirely upon the degree of class consciousness of the workers.

Why must the Workers Communist Party propagate and work for a Labor Party?

1—Because the slogan "For a Labor Party" corresponds with the stage of development of the class consciousness of the entire left wing of the labor movement, in other words of hundreds of thousands of workers in the United States.

It seems certain that these masses, not within four weeks, not within four months, but within the near future can be organized into a labor party.

2—The fight for the Labor Party, the slogan, which says that the workers should emancipate themselves politically from the capitalists, this fight itself is the most useful fight for Communists. A worker who today still votes for the capitalists, will not support the Communist Party, the dictatorship of the proletariat, tomorrow. Only a person who has really forgotten everything of the American labor movement can advocate this program. I can say to the workers: Cast these dogs, the capitalists, aside. The worker hates the capitalists; he fights them to get higher wages; but he unfortunately does not yet hate them **AS A CLASS**, on a national scale. In America today we can teach the workers to hate the capitalists as a class only by the slogan of the Labor Party.

3—The Labor Party slogan is the only one which can successfully appeal to the entire working class, irrespective

of where the various sections of the working class stand at present politically. We can go to the workers in the republican or in the democratic party and say to them: "You are workers; you fight on the economic field against the capitalists. You should also separate yourselves from the capitalists politically. You cannot win your strikes, for the government uses the power of the courts and troops against you. The republicans and the democrats will never support you, for they are the parties of capital. Political action independent of the capitalists is necessary; the working class must have its own party—the Labor Party." At the same time, however, I can go to the workers in the LaFollette "party." I can tell them: "You are in a petty-bourgeois party, which never fights energetically against the trusts. The LaFollette 'party' is no friend of the workers." I can also oppose the so-called "non-partisan" policy of the A. F. of L. with the slogan of the Class Labor Party. Only with this slogan, with the idea of a class party, can I scotch for the workers the principle of punishing the enemies of the workers and rewarding their friends today in the democratic and tomorrow in the republican party.

It is a life and death question for our Communist Party—and not only in America—that we fight in the daily struggle for the immediate demands of the workers. We must exploit these partial struggles in order to develop the class consciousness of the workers. We must unite these partial struggles under political slogans; we must attempt to develop the local struggles upon a national scale and to transform them into political struggles. In the present period in the United States, where the working class has as yet no mass party at all—neither reformist nor revolutionary—the slogan of an independent class party of the workers (the Labor Party slogan) is the chief inclusive slogan for all partial demands, for all partial struggles.

Now for the most important, the most essential point. What is the explanation for the fact that in America the development towards a mass party of the working class takes the form of a Labor Party? How does it come in many countries we have Labor Parties and in others Social-Democratic Parties? What is the fundamental difference? In many countries there are parties built up on individual membership: That is the Social-Democratic type as we see it in Germany, France, Italy, Russia, etc. Then the other type, Labor Party parties which are based on the trade unions, on the principle of collective membership, as in the Anglo-Saxon countries, in Belgium, etc.

The history of these countries and especially the history of the working class will explain to us how the Labor Party type developed historically in certain countries and

the Social-Democratic type in others. In the countries with a Labor party, at first the trade unions (England) and later the political parties arose. Vice versa, where we have mass Social-Democratic parties, we see that at first the political party and later the trade unions were formed, as in Russia, Austria, Germany, etc. That is, however, not yet the basic reason. When we analyze further, we find that in countries where an imperialist development or at least an industrial monopolist development split the working class at an early date, the trade unions were formed first, while the political parties arise very much later. The divided working class is not able to form a political party because, firstly, the aristocratic section of the working class is not interested in the political party. This aristocratic section of the working class was able to defend its interests in the trade unions; its political interests were ideologically, and in part in reality not different from those of the bourgeoisie. The other section, the real proletariat, was, on the contrary without the leadership of the aristocracy of labor, which contains the educated elements of the working class suitable for leadership. Deprived of these elements, the real proletariat was able neither to organize trade unions, nor to form political parties. That is the real basic reason for the fact that at first the trade unions appeared. The trade unions acted at first only as organizations of the aristocracy of labor, and only later accepted unskilled workers. The classic example of this is Great Britain. There we see, after the first revolutionary period of Chartism, after the beginning of imperialist development, the split of the working class as pointed out by Marx, Engels and Lenin. We see the split caused by the aristocracy of labor—we see the aristocratic trade union. The mass of unskilled workers were not organized at all. It was only vindictive attacks of the capitalist governments upon the privileges of the aristocracy of labor, court decisions against the existence of the trade unions of the labor aristocracy, which brought about a revolution.

What did this revolution consist of? Of two factors: Firstly, New Unionism; secondly, Labor Party. In the 'nineties masses of unskilled workers were forced into the trade union movement for the first time. That was the period of the so-called New Unionism. The memoirs of Tom Mann give an illuminating picture of this revolution. But something more than that happened. The trade unions were compelled to take part in politics. The government, the central executive committee of the bourgeoisie, had attacked the aristocracy of labor, not only as individual trade or craft organizations, but as a unit, as the organization of a class. That made the trade unions class conscious for the first time—i. e., gave them a political trend. The birth of the Labor Party in Great Britain is a product of this development.

Furthermore, we find that a very remarkable factor plays a great role in the birth of the British (and of every) Labor Party—a small political party, built upon individual membership, the Independent Labor Party.

The Independent Labor Party played the part of midwife in the birth of the Labor Party in Great Britain. It was small, had no more than 20,000 members approximately, in the second year of the existence of the Labor Party in fact no more than 16,000. None the less it was the conscious factor of the situation driving the movement forward, it was able to occupy all the strategic positions, and it was able to

break the opposition of all the old, respected leaders of the old trade union movement to the formation of a Labor Party. It was able to do all this just because it was built up upon individual membership, because it was a conscious, disciplined party, small but maneuverable, ideologically only the representative of a pink socialism, but nevertheless far in advance of the stage of development of the class consciousness of the British working class at that time. It was able to play that part, because at that time, precisely in consequence of the circumstance that it represented the idea of a political party of the proletariat independent of the bourgeoisie, it was the representative of all the interests of the working class.

We see the same in Belgium. The Belgian Labor Party has no less than 700,000 members; it is built up on the basis of the trade unions and of the cooperatives. This great mass of labor organizations is completely dominated by the small Vandervelde group, which has no more than 14,000 members, but is built up on individual membership, is consciously social-democratic, with discipline and political aims. This small group with its 14,000 members dominates the powerful mass organizations of the Belgian workers.

Putting the problem historically, we see that the following factors combine to give birth to a labor party, that the following factors determine that in a given country the development of the mass party of the working-class takes the form of the Labor Party:

- 1—Imperialist development.
- 2—The split of the working class into the aristocracy of labor and the real proletariat.
- 3—The fact that historically at first the trade union and then later the political party arose.
- 4—The attacks of the capitalist government (troops, laws, courts) upon the trade unions.
- 5—The presence of a politically organized minority, which can take over the ideological and organizational leadership of the new Labor Party and which serves as the driving force of the Labor Party development.

This development, which we had in England in the 'nineties, only began in America in 1918. The war, the development of a giant, bureaucratic centralized state power, the interference of the government in the daily life of the workers and poor farmers, the use of government troops and of injunctions against strikers, the giant labor struggles in 1922 in which no less than one million workers were on strike at the same time, the profound industrial crisis in 1921, together with a catastrophic crisis of American agriculture, the trenchant fractional groupings within the old capitalist parties, which as an expression of the intensified struggle, threatened them with a split—all these factors drove the masses of the working class towards the formation of a Labor Party.

All these factors, which in England called forth the Labor Party as the type of class party of the proletariat, are present in the United States. America is an imperialist country, and in no other country is there such a deep split

in the proletariat as in the United States. The separation of the aristocracy of labor from the real proletariat is even further emphasized by the circumstance that the aristocracy of labor is in the main American, while the proletariat is overwhelmingly foreign-born. The political helplessness of the proletariat is multiplied manifold by the fact that it consists of fifty-six nationalities. In no country are there such great differences between the standard of living and custom of the aristocracy of labor and the proletariat proper. The war, however, changed all this completely. The tremendous development of the war industries, coupled with the prohibition of immigration, has raised the wages and standard of living of the unskilled workers to a remarkable extent. Government control during the war and the great systematic offensive of the employers after the war have taken away many privileges of the labor aristocracy. The wages of the aristocracy of labor did not rise to a degree comparable with that of the proletarian unskilled labor elements. A process of equalization, of levelling, has taken place in the American working class. We see from 1919 to 1922, a period of New Unionism in America. Large masses of unskilled workers were organized, especially in the metal and textile industries. The increasing court decisions against the trade unions of the labor aristocracy, making them liable collectively for all the acts of each of their individual members, and making each individual member liable for their collective acts, have given birth for the first time in the trade unions to the idea of political activity. That is how there began the great historical process of the emancipation of the American working class, its emancipation from the bourgeoisie. A remarkable picture! The most powerful industrial country in the world is the last to fall into line. The political emancipation of the proletariat, which began in Germany in the 'sixties, in Russia in the 'eighties, and in England in the 'nineties, only commenced in America as a result of the world war, in 1918, in the post-war period. It must be understood, however, that these beginnings were no longer made in the peaceful period of the 'sixties nor within a semi-petty bourgeois proletariat.

The entire tempo of development is determined and naturally strongly accelerated by the circumstances that America is a country of the most highly concentrated industry, that we are living in the period of imperialism, that Europe has gone through a number of revolutions, that Soviet Russia exists, and that the Communist International is at work. The example of the growth of the British Labor Party and more especially, the existence of the MacDonald government, have had a profound effect upon the masses of the American trade unions.

We must understand these circumstances. The entire problem of the Labor Party cannot be understood if one does not consider the basic factors. The basis for the development of a mass party of the proletariat in America was established by the war and post-war period, by the growth of two new factors: 1—the development of a strongly centralized government such as America never had before, which through its attacks upon the trade unions all along the line did much to develop the class consciousness of the proletariat and the political orientation of the trade unions; 2—the leveling process within the proletariat, which was

brought about by the endangering of the privileges of the labor aristocracy, by the cessation of immigration and the Americanization of unskilled laborers by genuine proletarianized American farmers who entered the factories in great numbers, for the first time in the history of America, has created a working class homogeneous enough to render possible a mass party of the working class.

These are the reasons for the fact that in the United States the development towards a mass party is not proceeding along German or French lines, i. e., individual membership, but along British lines, that is, the collective method, trade union membership. Historical development shows that up till now all the endeavors to found a political mass organization of the working class in America has moved in the direction of the Labor Party type.

Nor are the factors lacking in America which in the founding of the Labor Party play the role of the British Independent Labor Party, that is, the role of the conscious mid-wife. We even have many groups which are intent upon taking over the leadership of the Labor Party: (1) The Socialist Party, (2) the political groups within the A. F. of L., (3) LaFollette's petty-bourgeois group, and (4) the Workers Communist Party. Of course it is no accident that in America we have a number of competing political groups and parties, based upon individual membership, which would like to seize the leadership of the Labor Party movement. Today conditions in America are already much more varied than in the England of the 'nineties. The existence of various competing groups is the explanation of the circumstance that in America several parallel labor parties were founded at the same time. It happened thus: each political group endeavored to gain influence over as large a section of the trade unions as possible. In order to understand this process of development, however, we must understand the fundamental conditions for the development of a Labor Party.

It is the role of the Workers Party to take the initiative in the founding of the Labor Party, and it is the duty of the Workers Party to endeavor to become, not the tail, but the head of the Labor Party. In England, the Communist Party was founded at a time when the Labor Party was already a powerful mass organization, i. e., where the problem facing the young Communist Party was whether to stay outside or to affiliate. In America, however, there exists the possibility for the Workers Party to participate actively in the founding of the Labor Party, for the taking over of the leadership in the fight for a Labor Party, for occupying the strategic positions, and uniting with the great masses in the trade unions while preserving its own organizational and ideological independence and integrity. It is fundamentally wrong to say, that we Communists should wait until the masses themselves form the Labor Party and should then affiliate. This is false, firstly, because what sort of Communists should we be if we were simply to wait and see whether the class consciousness of the workers is making progress or not, if we were not to employ every possible means to accelerate the process of the crystallization of the class consciousness of the proletariat? And secondly, it is false because if we Communists only wait and see whether a Labor Party develops, we thus relinquish the leadership of the Labor Party

movement to our competitors and opponents, the Socialists, the Fitzpatrickites or the LaFollette group.

It is said that the Workers Party cannot take over the leading role in a Labor Party, because a Labor Party is too opportunist to be initiated and led by a Communist Party. That is wrong, of course. Dozens of quotations from Marx and Engels upon the British and American Labor movements could be made in which they attack the point of view of sectarian British socialism as well as the sectarian standpoint of the German Communists in America, and continually emphasize the necessity of linking up with the existing labor movement, be it ever so opportunist. If this objection held water, we could not enter the trade unions nor attempt to seize the strategic positions there. It should not be forgotten that the Labor Party is nothing but a bloc of trade unions, a loose-knit system of delegates, a network of representatives of the local trade unions for political purposes. What was Lenin's standpoint on this question? I do not mean now his last point of view, when he advised the British Communists to enter the Labor Party. It may be said that Lenin gave this advice when the Labor Party was already a powerful mass organization. But fortunately we have a clear and characteristic stand taken by Lenin on the Labor Party question at a time when the Labor Party in England was in its very infancy, in 1908. It was at a meeting of the Executive of the Second International. Lenin was a member of the Executive. On the agenda was the question of whether the Labor Party should be admitted to the Second International or not. A singular discussion arose. The opportunist Independent Labor Party said: The Labor Party must be admitted, for it is the mass party of the proletariat. Hyndman's Social-Democratic Federation said sectarianly: we are against admission; these are nothing but opportunists who do not know what Marxism is. Kautsky proposed to admit the Labor Party because the Labor Party is the socialist-revolutionary party of the British proletariat. What did Lenin say? He was in favor of admission, but did not agree with Karl Kautsky's motivation. He said that we must admit the Labor Party because the Labor Party is the first step of the real organized masses of British workers in the direction of revolutionary socialism. Thus, Lenin was against the sectarian attitude of Hyndman as well as Kautsky's opportunist reasoning. He said we must admit the Labor Party to the International—at that time Lenin's International—but we must tell the truth: it is only the first step in the direction of revolutionary socialism; this is not yet the party of revolutionary socialism. In other words, Lenin said: "The first step." And he said that about a party which really had not yet completely separated itself organizationally, and, of course, "even less ideologically," from the bourgeoisie. As Lenin pointed out in his articles at the time, the Labor Party in England had at that time not yet carried on a single independent election campaign, it had only declared itself in parliament as a separate group. Nevertheless, Lenin's sharp eyes already saw the first step towards the independent mass party of the British proletariat.

And time has shown that Lenin was right. The pink Independent Labor Party, this opportunist group, has become the leader of the Labor Party, because it allied itself

with the Labor Party, because it occupied all the strategic positions in time, and because it took over the initiative and the leadership of the Labor Party movement. Hyndman's Social-Democratic Federation, however, turned from the Labor Party in opposition to the living Marxist, Lenin, in the name of a dead, non-existent Marxism, and thus condemned itself to vegetation as a sect. Nor did this narrow-minded, sectarian turning aside from the living mass movement save it from becoming opportunist. It is no accident, but a warning example that Hyndman died in disgrace as a social patriot. We must not forget this warning example. There exists the danger that in America Hillquit's Socialist Party or another opportunist group may seize the leadership in the Labor Party movement, and there exists the other danger that our Party, the Workers Communist Party, stand aside skulking sectarianly and thus dry up just like the British Social-Democratic Federation.

The Workers Communist Party must fight for the soul of the masses, for the acceleration of the development of the class consciousness of the working class; we must not merely cheer now and then for the dictatorship of the proletariat. Our fight for a Labor Party may cost us dearly, for the reactionary trade union bureaucrats are against the Labor Party, and the Hillquit socialists want to steal it. The fight for the Labor Party, however, is principally in and for the trade unions. The fight for the Labor Party does not take us away from the work in the trade unions; the Labor Party is nothing but a bloc of trade unions. It is only in the trade unions that we can fight for the Labor Party. Only the trade unions can be the base of the Labor Party. The battlefield in the fight for the Labor Party is the trade union and only the trade union.

The Labor Party cannot become a party competing with our Workers (Communist) Party. The Workers Party is built up on individual membership; the Labor Party, however, upon collective trade union membership. We can go to a worker and say: Join the Communist Party and get your trade union to affiliate to the Labor Party. We can go with both demands to the same workers at the same time. Through this policy we can link up the Party with the masses and at the same time build up and enlarge the party. Through this policy we will not liquidate the party but increase its membership.

The Workers (Communist) Party must endeavor as a foundation of the Labor Party and thus make its historical consciously leading element to take the initiative for the claim for the leadership and hegemony of the American laboring masses.

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