

Problems of Party Growth

By J. PETERS

"If we judge by the only reliable objective measurement of our membership, then we have to report that instead of going forward we have slipped backward since the Convention of our Party, since the last meeting of the Central Committee where we took this question up so sharply. In some cases this slip-back takes on serious proportions. We have seen in the past months such fluctuation of membership as reflected in dues payments that really it is alarming.

"Does this mean that the people are going away from us politically? No, it means no such thing. Large new masses are coming to us politically, but it means that *we* are falling down on our job of leadership and organization. It means that we are not creating revolutionary organizing forces out of this political influence that we have. It means that we are in danger of losing these forces, that we are failing to secure the guarantees for the continuation of this growth, and that we are opening ourselves to the most serious attacks by our enemies." (From Comrade Browder's report to the meeting of the Central Committee, Sept. 5-6, 1934.)

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ONE OF the most burning problems in our Party was, and remains even today, the great turn-over in membership. Between 1930 and 1934 about 60,000 workers filled out application cards for membership in the Party and paid initiation fees. But only 28 of every 100 of these were retained in the Party. For a long period, up until 1933, we lost as many members as came into our ranks. Dues payments remained below 10,000. In June, 1932, we finally broke through this "insurmountable" figure. The average dues-payments slowly but constantly increased; the turn-over, although quite high, was smaller than heretofore. In October, 1932, we reached the number of 20,000 dues-paying members.

Before the Convention, in 1934, we had an average of about

THE RECRUITING DRIVE

We draw the attention of the comrades to the method of recruiting proposed by the C.C. in its statement and special Letter to every Party member.

Personal recruiting is the method proposed. Every Party member must seek the candidates for membership among his co-workers and collaborators in the shop, union, other mass organizations and among his neighbors.

Collective leadership of the personal recruiting. The Party units (and fractions) must collectively discuss the proposed list of candidates and assign to every member a number of such candidates.—Ed.

24,000 dues-paying members. (It would be wrong, however, to use the average number of dues stamps sold as a final estimate of membership. There are many thousands of members in the Party who do not pay dues. The figures of a number of districts show that the membership recruited is about 25 per cent higher than the average dues-payments. At the same time, the only objective measurement of the fluctuation is on the basis of dues-payments.)

At the Eighth National Convention of our Party, Comrade Browder, dealing with the vital question of fluctuation, sounded the danger signal:

“Every weakness, and especially such weakness as exhibited in this still high degree of fluctuation, signalizes a danger to the successful building of the revolutionary movement in America. The whole Party must be roused to a consciousness of this problem. All the forces of the Party must be concentrated upon the task of holding and consolidating every new recruit.”

Have the Party organizations noted this danger signal? Have we concentrated all of our forces “upon the task of holding and consolidating” our membership? The figures answer these questions. The dues-payments in the four months after the Convention remained at the same level, in spite of the fact that thousands of new members were recruited monthly into the Party.

Two months after the Convention, the Central Committee, at its plenary session, discussed the problem of fluctuation, and decided to examine thoroughly the work of the lower organizations in several districts in order to ascertain the reasons for the high fluctuation and unsatisfactory recruiting. In July of this year, a special committee was sent into three concentration districts—Nos. 5, 7 and 8—to carry out this decision.

In these three districts a decisive change was found in the orientation towards factory and union work—especially in the district committees and the concentration sections. The number of shop nuclei in the districts had increased since the Convention; the higher committees gave more attention to the work of the shop nuclei; the work in the A. F. of L. was more seriously considered and discussed, with the result that the number of Party members in the A. F. of L. unions had increased since the Convention. The number of shop nuclei in the whole Party, since the Convention, has increased by more than 100.

The examination of the units and sections was based on such points as: (1) Mass activity of the unit; (2) Utilization of the *Daily Worker*, literature, leaflets, mass meetings, etc.; (3) Initiative of the unit; (4) Unit leadership; (5) Inner-Party education and discussions; (6) Guidance from higher committees.

In the city of Pittsburgh, the Commission examined a territorial

unit in the Hill section, which had had 24 members six months earlier and had 18 members now. During this period six members were dropped or expelled and two members moved out of town without transfers. This unit had in its territory two important factories, a meat-packing plant and the National Biscuit Company. There were also seven block committees with 350 members, one I.L.D. branch with 54 members (four Party members in it), and a Y.C.L. unit of ten members.

Despite this mass base and despite the fact that individual Party members were active in the unemployment organizations (block committees), the unit recruited only two members in six months. The reason for this can be readily understood when we learn that during this period, the unit did not issue any leaflets in its own name, and held only one Party mass meeting in its territory. Furthermore, while the comrades assigned to the Unemployment Council were splendid fighters, they did not, as Communists, seek to strengthen the influence of our Party among these workers. The number of *Daily Workers* sold in the territory was negligible. The Party had not been brought forward.

Only four political discussions were held in the unit in six months, which showed why the members of the unit did not fully understand their role as Communists. There had been no discussion on the Resolution of the Eighth Convention of our Party. The unit meetings were burdened with a long, poorly-prepared agenda.

As regards the Hill section itself. After the reorganization of the section several months prior to the investigation, it had approximately 175-185 members. The Commission found that after the section had recruited 75 new members, it had on record 200. There are about 2,000 workers in the section territory in the Unemployment Councils, the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, and the International Labor Defense, as a result of the splendid struggles led by the Hill section. Although many units in the section were very active and showed great initiative in tackling local problems, especially among the unemployed and Negro masses, these struggles did not sufficiently reflect themselves in an increase in Party membership.

One of the weaknesses in the work of the section was the collective work in the section committee. The section organizer himself participated actively in mass work, but the other members of the committee were not sufficiently involved in the leadership of the section. This restricts the personal leadership and guidance given by the section to the units. At the time of the examination, there were no Agitprop, organization secretary, or financial secretary functioning.

The examination of one township unit in the Turtle Creek Section brought forward the following facts and problems: This township has a population of about 5,000, of which about 40 per

cent were working in the Westinghouse plant. Within six months, the four members constituting the unit recruited another four, all of whom are today paying Party dues regularly. There were many hundreds of Westinghouse workers in the town; but the unit had failed to understand the necessity of helping the shop nucleus in reaching the workers in the factory through mass agitation and propaganda. Hence, the unit, during the six-month period, never issued a leaflet or arranged any mass meeting in the name of the Party. No *Daily Workers* were sold in the town. All activities were carried out in the name of the Unemployment Council. It is clear that with such methods, one of the main tasks of this street unit, to work hand in hand with the shop nucleus to help penetrate the ranks of the Westinghouse workers, could not be carried out.

In Detroit, one of the territorial units examined was around the Hudson auto factory. Six months ago the unit had had 19 members. Six were transferred to the shop unit and eight dropped. How has this unit functioned? In six months, no leaflet had been issued by the unit in its own name, nor was a single meeting held under its auspices. Party meetings were held in the unit territory when called by the section committee. The unit bureau did not meet. For three months there had been no discussion of any kind in the unit. The Eighth Convention Resolution was never discussed. During the six months the unit recruited only two new members. Today the unit has altogether 12 members including six members who were transferred from other units. Five of these are six months behind in dues.

About three or four months prior to the examination of the unit, 30 subscriptions to the *Daily Worker* had been obtained. Since then, however, no new subscriptions were secured. The work of the active members of the unit (about 60 per cent of the membership) was limited to distribution of leaflets issued by the district, the section, and the various mass organizations.

In contrast to this unit, the Commission examined a unit in the Negro belt in Detroit, which had had ten members six months before, but then had 28, of whom 24 paid dues regularly. The unit bureau met; the unit concentrated on a factory and sold 30 copies of the *Daily Worker* daily, and also sold 75 copies of the *Auto Workers' News* and 30 *Liberators* in its territory. It had distributed leaflets in the name of the unit, and held open-air meetings under its auspices. There were regular discussions at the unit meetings.

Obviously, the growth of this unit and the relatively low fluctuation in membership, in contrast to the situation in the other unit mentioned above, were in a large measure due to the better methods of work, the functioning of the unit bureau, the attempts to raise the ideological level of the membership of the unit, and its initiative in bringing the Party forward before the masses.

A general complaint in the units examined in Detroit was that they do not get sufficient assistance from the higher bodies, and that the unit bureaus do not function.

In Detroit, the Commission found the same situation as exists in Pittsburgh. Individual Party members were very active, were, in fact, overburdened with work, but much of their work properly belonged to the membership of mass organizations, who were not sufficiently activized in our campaigns. Thus, the Party members distributed leaflets for the Unemployment Council, for the League Against War and Fascism, etc., and because of the weak political education in the units, the weaker elements dropped out of the Party.

In examining the reasons for fluctuation in these various units, the Commission found that the members who dropped out usually gave as their reason or excuse: sickness, family trouble, etc. These, however, are not always the real reasons, because, as the Commission found, most of the dropped members remain active in other mass organizations close to the Party. The main problem lay in the character of the work of the unit and its method of leadership.

In the Chicago District, the Commission examined one unit which functions in a territory of partly Negro and partly white population, which six months ago had 20 members, with a majority of office and social workers. There were three Negro women, housewives, in the unit. Within a period of six months, seven members dropped out of the Party, among them the three Negro women.

An analysis showed a very serious situation existing in the unit. Similar situations undoubtedly can be found elsewhere. The three women comrades had been in the Party almost a year, and were in the forefront of every struggle. When they dropped out of the Party, they continued their active work in the I.L.D. The other comrades in the unit explained this by the fact that they had gotten tired, and had no money to pay dues, etc. However, the Commission found entirely different, more fundamental, reasons. Investigation showed that at unit meetings the white comrades (social workers and office workers) occupied all of the time and pushed the Negro comrades to the background. Unconscious white chauvinist tendencies were revealed in the unit. It is clear that in this lay the basic cause for the three Negro women leaving the unit.

This unit recruited two members during the six months—a lawyer and a social worker. There had been no organized discussion at the unit meetings; nor did the unit discuss the Eighth Party Convention resolution. In six months' time, no leaflets were issued by the unit, and only one meeting had been arranged.

Another unit examined had the task of concentrating on a railroad yard. This unit had 14 members six months earlier, and during the six-month period, did not recruit a single new member. The unit

bureau had not met. In six months, only one political discussion was held; no leaflets were issued; no meetings were held in the name of the unit; and no *Daily Workers* were sold in the unit territory.

None of the points on the agenda had been prepared by the unit bureau, since the bureau had not met. We can gather the confusion existing at the unit meeting.

In contrast to this, the Commission examined a unit concentrating on a machine shop. Six months ago the unit had seven members. In six months' time, the unit recruited seven members and expelled one disruptive element. Not one member dropped out of the Party. During this period, the unit established a shop nucleus in the concentration factory. The unit bureau met regularly and concretely worked out the agenda for the coming meeting. The unit carried on excellent work among the population in this territory, holding street meetings, selling literature, and large numbers of the *Daily Worker* every day. In order to reach the young workers, the unit bureau had organized a soccer team, creating considerable enthusiasm among the youth. Comrades who were assigned to specific work reported regularly to the unit bureau, which, after discussion, brought the main problems before the unit meeting. The membership read *The Communist* and the *Party Organizer*. The unit had a discussion at every meeting. Real enthusiasm was evident among the membership for their work.

From all the facts gathered in the various districts, sections, and units, we can draw general conclusions as to the unsatisfactory growth of the Party and the tremendous fluctuation:

1. The most outstanding shortcoming from which many others flow, is the weak leadership in the lower organizations—the units and sections. The Open Letter, in setting the task for the Party, states that “the center of gravity of Party work must be shifted to the development of the lower organizations, the factory nuclei, local [section] organizations, and street nuclei”.

The realization of the tasks, much less their execution, has not penetrated sufficiently the Party organizations. While there is a considerable improvement in orientating the Party towards the factory and union work (for example, 14 new shop nuclei in the Chicago district since the Convention; double the number of Party members in the A. F. of L. unions, and the noticeable payment of attention to the lower organizations in certain sections), systematic daily guidance is missing as yet to the lower organizations. The lower organizations rely too much in many places on written directives from the higher bodies. Some of the districts abolished the Organizational Letter, but replaced it with another form of written instructions. This would not be bad if it were accompanied by personal guidance. But in most of the districts, this personal guidance is given only through

meetings of the functionaries, where in many cases only the written instructions are repeated and hardly anything else is taken up. This applies equally to the districts and sections. Unless the Party committees take steps immediately to shift the center of gravity of their work to the lower organizations, and patiently help, guide, and develop the forces in the units and sections, the change in the situation will be too slow.

2. The Open Letter emphasizes:

"Every Party member must now understand that it depends on correct policy and above all, the *execution* of the correct policy whether we will be able to mobilize the masses of workers for struggle and whether our Party, in this historically favorable situation, will become the decisive mass Party of the American proletariat, or whether the bourgeoisie with the help of its social-fascist and fascist agents will succeed in disorganizing the mass movement and keeping it down."

But our units and sections, because of the weak leadership and insufficient guidance from the higher committees, do not yet fully understand the meaning of this paragraph. Otherwise, we would not have a situation where many units have not yet discussed the resolution of the Convention. In many places, we fall back on the old habit of adopting resolutions without carrying them out. And how can we carry out resolutions, if we do not discuss them, if we do not understand them? Because of the lack of discussion on the basic documents of the Party, the lower organizations in many cases have no political life but are merely the apparatus in the hands of the higher committees or mass organizations for leaflet distribution, money collections, etc., etc. At the same time, the lower organizations fail to draw the non-Party masses around the unit and section into activity of the Party.

Here it is necessary to quote again from the Open Letter:

" . . . the Party must carry on a systematic struggle against the bureaucratic isolation of the apparatus from the Party masses, against the suppression of inner-Party democracy, for the development of political life in the lower organizations, particularly in the factory nuclei, for the development of thorough-going self-criticism, for the development of initiative in the lower organizations and for the improvement of its functioning cadres. Every Party member, and especially every Party functionary, must be a real organizer of mass struggles in his particular sphere of work."

3. The *Daily Worker* is not yet fully utilized by our functionaries in the sections and units, and by some district functionaries. They do not realize the great help and guidance they can get from the *Daily Worker* in the general conduct of their work, and in the political line to be followed by the Party. The Commission hardly

found one unit where the comrades understood how the *Daily Worker* could assist them in their activities.

4. There is insufficient effort to recruit new members into the Party. There is no systematic, daily hammering at the necessity of recruiting; and we have as yet not overcome the conception that recruiting is to be carried on only during a drive. At the same time, the Party organizations, especially the units, do not react sufficiently to local political issues and do not come out boldly before the masses as the Communist Party, but the individual members work among these masses as representatives of various mass organizations (Unemployment Council, trade unions, I.L.D., L.S.N.R., etc.).

As a result of this method of work, the workers in the territory of a street unit do not know that a Communist Party exists in that territory; they do not know what the Communist Party stands for, and the poison spread by the demagoguery of the bourgeois politicians finds a fertile field. Last, but not least, there is yet a certain carelessness in recruiting new members. The new members are recruited in some instances without proper propaganda, personal acquaintance, etc.

5. Unfamiliarity with Party literature and failure to read the *Daily Worker* lead to fluctuation. In those units where the membership reads our literature and the *Daily Worker* the general mass work of the unit is much more effective, and the fluctuation is cut to a minimum.

6. With the exception of Pittsburgh proper, there is insufficient work carried on among certain sections of the Negro masses. This is due largely to the weak leadership in the sections and units, to confusion on the Negro question, and to elements of white chauvinism.

7. There is a decided lack of systematic activity to develop new forces from among the native-born and Negro members of the Party.

8. While in certain sections and units, especially in District 8, there is a definite change in orientation towards work among the youth, this trend is not general.

Some additional and minor reasons for fluctuation are as follows: Comrades are dropped for non-payment of dues in cases where payment is impossible. The Commission found, for example, that several comrades had been dropped for non-payment at a time when they were unemployed and were receiving relief only in the form of food. Too many collections in units are also a cause of fluctuation. Those unable to contribute feel ashamed, at first stay away, and then drop out.

The Open Letter and the Resolution of the Eighth National Convention of our Party deal in great detail with the problems presented here. There is no need to repeat the appropriate sections

from these two basic documents of our Party. Here we propose a few suggestions based on the experiences gained by the Commission in examining units and sections in three concentration districts:

1. The basic problem is to give more guidance and help to the lower organizations, to introduce systematic educational activities in the units. It is necessary for the **Central Committee to supply the** lower Party organizations with the most essential material about the Party program, policy, and organization. This material should be prepared in such form that in units where there are no developed comrades to lead the discussion on this material, any one of the members could read the lessons as a report. The *Daily Worker* should print regularly basic articles on the problems dealt with above.

2. Two or three instructors sent by the Central Committee should be on the road continuously, having as their main task, work with the units, and discussing their reports with the District Bureau and the Political Bureau of our Party.

3. Classes should be organized in each unit for from five to six weeks. These classes may be organized as follows: (a) at the regular unit meetings twice a month, or (b) at a special time on a voluntary basis; if necessary, two or three units meet together.

4. We must train our functionaries, especially in the sections and units, how to assign the membership, particularly new members, to work. This should not be done in arbitrary fashion, but, for most effective results, after considering the desires of the individual Party member, and his ability to carry out certain tasks. The unit bureau should always bear in mind that the new members are not full-fledged Communists when they join the Party. It is our task to make Communists out of them, and this takes time. The basic principle should be, not to overburden the individual members with work, but to divide the responsibility as much as possible, and involve in activity the broadest strata of non-Party workers in the shop or unit territory.

5. The investigation of the Commission showed that members drop out of the Party because they do not see the difference between the Communist Party and the mass organizations under our influence. The unit members find they do not sufficiently participate in the formulation of our policies of work within these organizations. The units, for the most part, carry out the instructions of the higher bodies. The shop nuclei, for example, get their instructions as to the policy in the shops from the higher fractions of the unions; the street nuclei get the policy for unemployed work in their territory from the fraction of the Unemployment Council. The task of the higher committees is to encourage the members of the units to exercise their full right to help make decisions on policy. The principle of democratic centralism must be made a reality in the lower organizations.

6. In order to give more help and guidance to the lower organizations, the District Bureaus should regularly examine the work of one section, based on a report prepared by the section committee. The same procedure should be followed by the section committee with the units. Special attention should be given to concentration sections, shop nuclei, concentration units.

7. Meetings of section organizers on a district scale, and of unit organizers on a section scale, should be utilized, not alone for organizational purposes, but for political discussions, with special regard to problems faced in particular territories. Comrades should be encouraged to give their opinions on all questions, to state the matters on which they are confused, so that they may be clarified on Party policy.

8. The lower organizations, the sections and units, must be encouraged to use the greatest initiative in their work, to conduct their own campaigns in the name of the Party in that particular territory, issuing leaflets, neighborhood papers, organizing mass meetings, etc. In District 8, Chicago, for example, the district leadership directed every unit in a certain campaign to issue its own leaflets, and examined them to see how the unit reacted politically to the issue.

9. The District and Section Committees should immediately work out plans to train functionaries for the units and sections. This can be done through: (a) evening schools; (b) functionaries' meetings; (c) individual attention to certain promising comrades.

The work done by the special Commission of the Central Committee in Districts 5, 7, and 8, should be continued. Special commissions should be established in all districts and sections to examine the work of the lower organizations. Such a first-hand analysis, based on personal investigation, will enable the districts to understand more clearly the political and organizational weaknesses and needs of the units and sections, and help to correct their work.

The results of such investigations by district and section commissions should be prepared as reports and discussed with district and section functionaries' meetings, popularized in the units, and utilized as the basis for articles in our press.