

PROBLEMS OF TRADE UNION WORK AND THE STRUGGLE FOR UNITY

ROSE WORTIS, *Director, New York State Trade Union Department,*

COMRADES, the two years since our last Party Convention have been rich with experience in our trade union work. However, it is not my intention at this time to review these experiences. This will be done at our Trade Union Commission and on the convention floor. I want to limit my remarks to elaborating some points already touched upon by Comrades Krumbein and Amter, particularly as they affect our work in the trade unions.

Epoch-making developments have taken place during the last two years. Organized labor has increased its ranks from 3,500,000 workers to 7,500,000, with powerful new unions in the mass production industries.

Once among the most backward sections of the world trade union movement, the American trade unions have pushed forward to an advanced position. For the first time, labor is emerging as a conscious political factor in the life of our country, influencing its domestic as well as its foreign policies.

Labor has defeated the maneuvers of big business to create a split between the trade union movement and the New Deal. The formation of LaFollette's National Progressive Party, which would also result in division, has been met with coldness. Instead we see a closer alliance between labor's forces, both C.I.O. and A. F. of L. with the Roosevelt New Deal policies.

The C.I.O. Conference at Washington and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union Convention gave full support to the progressive measures sponsored by President Roosevelt. The clothing workers at the same time dissociated themselves from the LaFollette Third Party Movement. The brazen attempts of the industrialists to pit the A. F. of L. against the Roosevelt Administration have met with little or no success. After some hesitation, the leadership of the American Federation of Labor came out in support of the Wages and Hours Bill, and the Recovery Program. The attack by William Green on the U. S. Chamber of Commerce indicates the path of the A. F. of L.

These developments show that the trade union movement is grasping the fact that it is not only the representative and spokesman for organized labor, but also the driving force in building an alliance with all other progressive groups for a common Democratic Front. Agreement in the ranks of organized labor on major political issues lays the base for united action between the C.I.O. and A. F. of L. in the coming state and national elections.

In our state, where more than one million workers march behind the banner of organized labor, unity is vital. We don't need Detroit or Seattle to prove it. Closer to home is the experience of Rochester which already has been mentioned by Comrade Krumbein. In that city because of a split in labor's ranks the American Labor Party polled only 6,000 votes. Yet at the beginning of the campaign, with labor united, 13,000 had enrolled in the American Labor Party. The recent primary elections in Pennsylvania brought the need for labor unity home to us even more dramatically.

The action of George Meany, President of the State Federation of Labor, in

ordering A. F. of L. unions to withdraw from the American Labor Party, while to be deplored, is not decisive. Neither is the action of the Central Trades and Labor Council of Greater New York. In the first place, this move is not supported by the majority of A. F. of L. locals. Secondly, I believe I am safe in saying that it will have no more practical value than previous decisions to bar Communists, if we are on the job. The hullabaloo over the resignation of George Troy from the American Labor Party, who only represents a skeleton building service organization in Brooklyn, and whose action was motivated by internal union considerations, indicates with what little seriousness the whole decision was taken by the important unions. To give this decision the thorough drubbing it deserves, progressive forces must undertake a drive in the local unions to rescind the action, and at the same time develop a campaign for widespread recruiting of individual members into Assembly District Clubs of the American Labor Party.

However, our work for unity in the coming elections cannot be limited to the A.L.P., which is not yet representative of the entire labor movement. We should take the initiative in setting up the legislative committees called for by the Central Trades, and take an active part in the work of the A. F. of L. Non-Partisan Committees, influencing them toward joint action in support of progressive candidates, agreeable to both C.I.O. and A. F. of L.—policies similar to those pursued in New York City last year. Such steps are of particular importance up-state, where the American Labor Party has not yet achieved a mass base, and where some trade union officials are still linked up with the Republican Marvin machine. Our comrades up-state, especially in Buffalo and Syracuse, are already taking some steps in this direction.

Our Party is fortunate in occupying a strategic position in relation to the policy for unity in the elections, since our comrades hold important positions in unions of both wings of the labor movement. A great responsibility therefore rests with us. I feel confident we will live up to it.

Now, comrades, I want to deal briefly with the question of trade union unity. The reasons for the failure of unity negotiations are well known. Murray, Hillman and Lewis, speaking at the recent Amalgamated Clothing Workers Convention, proved that the issue still remains: are the workers in the mass production industries to be organized into industrial unions? Murray was told by Green to consult with Hutcheson, Wharton, Tracy and all the other craft overlords when he asked specifically: will the A. F. of L. recognize an industrial union in steel? No better illustration is needed to show that the attempts of Dubinsky and the *Jewish Daily Forward* to place the responsibility for the failure of negotiations on the C.I.O. are absolutely without foundation. It also proves that the C.I.O. was and is a staunch fighter for the unity that will maintain the splendid unions it has organized.

True, it also shows that the pressure of the rank and file has not been strong enough to force the A. F. of L. leaders to back down from their opposition to unity. In spite of the stupid slanders of the *Jewish Daily Forward* clique, we join with Hillman, Murray and Lewis in believing that the split is not permanent and that the possibilities of unity on a just basis still exist.

Our belief that the decision of the C.I.O. to strengthen itself by organizing

a national convention will advance rather than retard the prospect of unity, is confirmed by the revival of discussion of peace and unity in the press, the excellent unity resolution adopted by the Amalgamated Convention and Hillman's speech there, the editorial on unity in the official organ of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union, whose President, Edward Flore, is a member of the Executive Council of the A. F. of L., and the statement by William Green that he will postpone the "war" on the C.I.O. until after the depression.

It has always been our contention that the stronger the C.I.O., the better the prospect of unity. We are further encouraged in this belief by an analysis of the present trend toward progressivism in the A. F. of L. Since the formation of the C.I.O., the Party has never for a moment permitted itself to be influenced by the pernicious and erroneous theory of the Lovestonites and Trotskyites that the A. F. of L. has outlived its usefulness, and that the desire for unity is "utopian." Our Party clearly recognized that the A. F. of L. still represents an organized force of 3,500,000 workers who cannot be wished out of existence to please the Lovestonites.

We have also recognized that the militant program and activities of the C.I.O. have had a profound effect on the A. F. of L. membership, which is a part of the American people, subject to the same economic forces and influenced by the same trends as are the workers in the C.I.O. unions. Unfortunately this analysis and policy of the Party has not always been backed up by practical day-to-day work in the local A. F. of L. unions.

Despite the resistance of the leadership, the A. F. of L. is breaking with its past reactionary policies and traditions and is being drawn into the current of progressive life and movement of our country. It is this swing of the A. F. of L. members towards progressivism which makes possible unity between the A. F. of L. and C.I.O. on a program of industrial unionism. The direction of the A. F. of L. is indicated by the increase in its membership. Inspired by the successful struggles of the C.I.O., former skeleton A. F. of L. organizations, such as food workers, bakers, some sections of teamsters, etc., have now grown into mass unions. Many building trades unions are finally opening their doors to the unorganized. In our state this means organization of tens of thousands of building trades workers, elimination of the kick-back, and enforcement of union conditions, provided that our comrades and other progressives see that the open door is not quickly closed.

Today the A. F. of L. has relegated to the scrap heap the Hoover-Green policy of "no strikes," pursued during the last depression with resulting wage cuts. Thousands of A. F. of L. workers are not only resisting wage cuts, but continuing to organize the unorganized, despite the depression. According to the figures of the State Labor Department, 12,582 were on strike during the first three months of 1938. Most of these strikes resulted in victory for the workers, and large numbers were unionized without the necessity of strikes.

It is indeed a new day in the A. F. of L. when 20,000 workers under the leadership of the Central Trades march on the streets of New York for the first time in 20 years to popularize the union label, carrying banners inscribed with slogans such as that carried by the Brooklyn Metal Trades Council: "Trade

Unions Are the Bulwark of Democracy." I am informed that one band even played the "Internationale."

It does not matter what the object of the leadership is. Once workers learn to act as an organized class, marching together, they will not be content to march merely for the popularization of the union label, but will use their organized strength to enforce union conditions and fight reaction.

The A. F. of L. has also abandoned its old stand against government aid for workers, expressed in its former opposition to unemployment insurance, social legislation, and nationalization of the railroads. A. F. of L. as well as C.I.O. unions fight for social legislation. In our state, both the A. F. of L. and C.I.O. are actively sponsoring what amounts to a joint program for the constitutional convention.

Even Gompers' so-called non-partisan political policy is being transformed from subservience to capitalist politicians, to a line of independent political action, despite the opposition of the leadership. This is best seen in the continued affiliation to Labor's Non-Partisan League of hundreds of locals and central bodies, which have repudiated Green's splitting edict, and also by the organization of A. F. of L. Non-Partisan Committees, whose activities in many centers, such as New York City last year, are similar to those of Labor's Non-Partisan League, and who support the same candidates. Through the active participation of progressive forces, the A. F. of L. Non-Partisan Committees in all states can serve as instruments of cooperation between the C.I.O. and A. F. of L. in the coming elections.

Progress in the A. F. of L. can also be noted in their policies on international affairs: specifically, Green's position on collective security, the boycott of Japanese goods, and affiliation to the Amsterdam International of Trade Unions, although the latter was undoubtedly undertaken for fear that the C.I.O. might affiliate.

Green and Hutcheson, of course, have not become progressives. But the policies of the A. F. of L. in the past few years unmistakably reflect the trend of its membership and show that the C.I.O. combined with the progressive forces in the A. F. of L. can exert some influence on the general policies of the organization. Little wonder that big business, while making some gestures toward the A. F. of L. in a move to spike the C.I.O., is still very hesitant about granting the A. F. of L. recognition. They know and fear the temper of the workers and are not so sure the leadership can control them.

The major task of our Party and other progressive forces is to improve our work in the A. F. of L., which has lagged to an extent since the formation of the C.I.O. Active participation in the life of the Central Trades bodies is of prime importance. Just think how much prestige the progressive movement would gain if our leading comrades who are doing such splendid work organizing and gaining improved working conditions would bring their experience to the conservative workers who conscientiously attend the Central Trades meetings. This would also help in breaking down the barrier between the progressive unions and the teamsters, and other conservative forces.

A real campaign is in order for the election of progressive delegates to the

State Federation of Labor convention which meets in Buffalo in August. Despite the expulsion of C.I.O. unions, the progressive delegation last year numbered twice that of 1936. With the increased strength of the progressives in New York City and a real campaign, we could have a progressive group which could make its voice heard at the national convention of the A. F. of L., meeting shortly thereafter.

I HAVE devoted the major part of my time to a discussion of A. F. of L. work, not because I consider this work more important, but because I want to emphasize the weak spots, so that energetic measures will be taken to correct them. However, lest the comrades in the C.I.O. think they are being neglected, I want to raise some problems facing us in the C.I.O. unions.

We are proud of the work done by our comrades in the C.I.O. unions as well as the assistance given by our Party in building a powerful C.I.O. movement in New York City as well as the state.

Tens of thousands have been organized not only through our assistance, but often through our initiative. We were instrumental in avoiding conflict between the A. F. of L. and the C.I.O. and have developed such a spirit of unity that it is not an uncommon thing to see A. F. of L. and C.I.O. workers side by side on the picket lines. Our Party membership in the trade unions has been increased by slightly more than 75 per cent since 1936. We have Party comrades working in about 600 local unions of the C.I.O. and A. F. of L.

We have become good and efficient organizers and administrators of important unions, distinguishing ourselves in leading strikes, negotiations with employers, and have even shown legal talent in presenting cases before the Labor Board. The unions under the leadership of our comrades and other progressives can record the greatest gains. But, comrades, we have still not given sufficient attention to improving the level of our work in the C.I.O., being too inclined to ignore all but the simple trade union issues.

Our comrades applauded the decisions of the C.I.O. Atlantic City conference, which are in line with the policies we have advocated for many years. But that does not mean that the Communists no longer have an independent role in the C.I.O. It means that our comrades must become the potent force in carrying out the progressive policies adopted at national conferences and conventions on such fateful issues as unemployment, legislative and political activity, the struggle against fascism, Negro work, etc.

And this is where our work shows definite shortcomings. Many comrades have been content to accept the decisions of the top leadership lethargically, waiting in "passive opposition," as Comrade Browder remarked, until some mistake is made, and then standing ready to say "I told you so." Our needle trades comrades, who have otherwise done excellent work, failed in large measure to explain the C.I.O. conference decisions, which would have made it impossible for the leadership to retreat from its position. Only now, when there is danger that the I.L.G.W.U. will withdraw from the C.I.O., do our comrades realize that they took too much for granted. Now they are beginning to popularize the C.I.O. and its relation to the immediate interests of the I.L.G.W.U. members.

We saw in the decision of the C.I.O. to organize the unemployed workers the realization of a policy we have advocated since 1930. Yet to this day, with the exception of the fur, radio, and electrical workers, painters, and the metal trades (the latter having only recently secured 700 W.P.A. jobs for their members) very few of the progressive unions have taken up, in a consistent and systematic manner, this work of really leading the struggle of the unemployed for relief and jobs. Just stop to think for a moment how far such activities can go in keeping the unions intact during a period of crisis.

The serious weakness of the work of our comrades in the political field is reflected in the Gerson case. The Red-baiting campaign of the entire press, excluding our own *Daily Worker*, was concentrated on Comrade Gerson. This reactionary drive was directed not only against our Party but against the entire progressive movement, and was so understood by most of the progressives. Unbelievable as it may sound, despite much urging, our active trade unionists did almost nothing, until very late, to arouse support for Gerson and the progressives.

Too often are we apt to forget that the struggle to build and preserve the unions is part and parcel of the struggle to defeat reaction on the political field. Picture what will happen to the organizing campaigns if reactionaries gain control of Congress and carry through the Chamber of Commerce amendment to the National Labor Relations Act. Or what will happen to the unemployed and the Social Security Act, if the Tories grab power and put into effect the Hoover starvation program. Congressman Bernard has described the consequences of a victory for the reaction as follows:

"The Wagner Act would be perverted to conform to the Vanderberg amendments and the program of the National Association of Manufacturers. It would mean a Magna Charta for company unionism, and a death warrant to free unionism. It would mean open hunting season for strikebreakers and company thugs, armed with machine guns and tear gas bombs. Civil liberties would be curtailed. We should have all America made over to fit the Jersey City pattern."

This artificial division between trade unionism and politics explains the lack of interest in the growth of the American Labor Party and general legislative work.

How many unions have displayed sufficient interest in politics to invite any of the four American Labor Party Assemblymen they helped to elect to a union meeting for a report on the last legislative session of Albany? This would not only stimulate increased membership in the American Labor Party but change a platonic interest in its affairs into a real love.

Of course, progress has been made. The splendid example of what can be done when we give leadership is seen in the vigorous campaign for President Roosevelt's relief and recovery program, the Wages and Hours Bill, and the lifting of the embargo against Loyalist Spain. We not only mobilized workers, but in some instances small businessmen, such as retail merchants. The C.I.O. can and should give leadership to the A. F. of L. in this field, as well as on the economic field.

It is only in recent months that the progressive trade unions have taken some steps to clarify to the workers the meaning of collective security. Through

our laxness we permitted Homer Martin, the Lovestoneites and Socialists to line up a number of unions behind the misnamed "Keep America Out of War Committee" which is strongly isolationist and opposed to the real peace policy which we propose. Our lack of vigilance is only now being corrected.

Another point: our work among the Negroes in the trade unions. Discrimination does not cease automatically when Negro workers are organized into unions. Chauvinism fostered among white workers by the employers does not disappear with the magic of a union card. Thousands of Negroes have been organized in laundry, cleaners and dyers, retail clerks, seamen, etc. Only through persistent struggle against discrimination in every form, and systematic education of white workers, can the unions really become instruments in fighting for the rights of the Negro people. The Negro worker correctly judges us white Communists not only by what we say in our program, but what we do in fighting with them for their rights on the jobs and in the unions where we are in a position to put our policies into practice. By bearing this in mind, we will not only help to consolidate the unions and build a real spirit of unity between white and Negro workers, but also help win the Negro people as allies in the Democratic Front.

AT OUR last convention, we set ourselves the task of seeing that all our Party members were union members—of building union organizations in unorganized industries, making New York City a union town, of developing united fronts with other groups in trade unions and bringing the trade union movement into the general progressive political movement. Despite the indicated weaknesses, our main objectives have been achieved. The trade union movement has been strengthened under the united leadership in most unions. Organization work and strikes are continuing despite the depression.

The Trotskyites and the Socialists under their influence have been isolated from the mass of the workers, although last year they still had some mass following. Now it is negligible. Their disruptive attempts to split the Pocket-book Workers Union, for example, have earned them little respect from the workers. In spite of their bitter opposition, a known Communist was elected as National Secretary with the knowledge of William Green. Another example is their recent defeat in the elections of the Waiters Local 16, affiliated to the Hotel and Restaurant International. However, it is a mistake to think that because the Trotskyites and Lovestoneites are not large in number, they do not constitute a danger to the trade union movement.

In Local 16, for instance, the actual Lovestoneites and Trotskyites can be counted on the fingers. But they served as the organizing center of all the reactionary elements, and through the use of demagoguery were able to secure a considerable vote for their combined slate.

We must therefore not neglect for a moment the task of exposing their activities, isolating them from the mass of the workers, and winning the support of these workers for our policies in the trade unions. We have sufficient facts at our disposal to show that the Trotskyites and Lovestoneites are not only enemies of the Soviet Union, and of Spain and China, but are trying to

disrupt the unity of labor in this country and must be driven from the labor movement.

Our problem today is to consolidate and extend the influence of the C.I.O., which is far from an easy task. Many C.I.O. unions in basic industries, shipyard, utility, steel and textile, are still weak. The workers were only beginning to enjoy the fruits of unionization when mass layoffs took place. The announcement by the railroad companies of a 15 per cent wage cut has encouraged other drives to institute wage cuts. If this is to be stopped it must be defeated first of all in the railroad industry through the efforts of the railroad workers in cooperation with all other workers. We can do a lot to assist. The pressure for wage cuts has been successfully resisted thus far particularly in centers where the labor movement is strong, and under progressive leadership.

However, it is true that in many instances, especially where the unions are new, the employers who were unable to put through cuts on a general scale, are beginning to chisel on the wages of the workers. We know from past experience that if this is permitted to go on, it will eventually result in a general wage reduction. It is therefore the task of the Communists in the trade unions to mobilize the workers for militant resistance to wage cuts and to take advantage of every opportunity to organize new workers as the best security for maintaining union standards.

To accomplish this, internal unity among the rank and file, as well as the leadership in every union, and maintenance of union discipline are prime necessities. The question of factionalism in the trade union movement has come to the fore as a result of the struggle in the United Automobile Workers. Our Party placed itself squarely and unequivocally on record against groups. There is no room for groups or factions in a union guaranteeing democratic rights to the workers. We made the question of unity and dissolution of factions a paramount issue at the last auto workers' convention. Because of this policy, a large section of the rank and file, and even part of the leadership have been won to our point of view.

We must recognize that the labor movement consists of varied groups, who may or may not see eye to eye with us on many issues. We must try to maintain unity, even if this entails sacrifices on our part, including the sharing of leadership even with those less qualified or less deserving.

Wherever this policy has been pursued, the workers have gained, and our prestige has been enhanced. It has convinced those not in agreement with us of our sincerity and our desire to place the workers' interests above all. The fruits of this policy are self-evident; never before has the respect for the Party been so great or has there ever been as little friction and as much united activity. To be sure, in some instances our comrades have foolishly permitted themselves to be drawn into factional struggles, both in the unions and the American Labor Party, but steps are already being taken to correct this.

RELATED to the question of internal unity is the problem of factions, raised by Comrade Stachel at the Party Builders' Congress. In discussing with other trade unionists the question of doing away with groups, we are often confronted with the following argument: "It is all very well for you Communists to talk about doing away with groups, because you have your Party frac-

tion." Comrades, we must answer this question if we are to have real unity in the trade union movement.

The answer was given by Comrade Stachel. In the present situation in the labor movement, especially in the progressive unions, with whose policies we agree in general, and which are democratically administered, there is no need for our Party to function through organized fractions. It is our job as union members to convince the membership of the correctness of our general Party policy in the trade unions, on specific as well as general issues, through argument and through day-to-day work.

Do you remember when our French Party, in concluding an agreement for unity in the trade union movement, agreed to dissolve fractions, how alarmed some of our comrades in this country were? They were afraid this would mean the liquidation of the Party influence in the trade unions. What is the result? Not only has our French Party succeeded in establishing genuine trade union unity, but it has grown by tens of thousands.

When our Party was small, when Communists in trade unions were persecuted and often expelled, fractions were necessary. Now we are working under entirely different conditions. We found that during the upsurge of the trade union movement, even fractions did not fully meet the situation. Industrial units were formed. They helped to consolidate the thousands of scattered Party forces in the trade unions, and made them think of our Party work in relation to work in the unions.

In quite a number of unions we have already begun to do away with fractions, with a resulting improvement in our relation to others in the union, in our recruiting, and in the improved life of our Party units. Comrade Potash gave ample proof of this at the New York County Convention. However, I want to caution the comrades against any tendency to convert industrial units into fraction meetings. The industrial units must educate the comrades on general policies of the Party and general political problems, and not take up routine matters which properly belong to the union.

These proposed changes in the methods of work in our mass organizations do not exclude the possibilities of calling our comrades together in a special meeting, should any emergency arise. Such meetings, however, should be the exception, not the rule.

I want to summarize my proposals as follows:

1. Abolition of general fraction meetings.
2. Leading comrades in unions to consult with each other on problems of the day-to-day work.
3. All decisions on Party policy to be discussed through the regular Party channels and Party press. On the basis of these general policies, our Party to go into the unions and try to win the membership to our point of view by persuasion.

I would like to conclude, comrades, with a few words about building the Party. Comrade Steinberg's report on the composition of the Party, its growth, fluctuation, etc., will certainly impress the trade union comrades. For in spite of our Party's splendid work in building trade union organization, the report reveals that the majority of the membership in our Party still consists of non-

industrial workers. A striking feature of the report is the small percentage of workers from basic industries. But despite that fact, as a result of our activities in organization of basic industries, we have been able to reach a new section of the population, including large numbers of Catholic workers.

The Catholic hierarchy is beginning to fear the influence of Communism, even to the extent of resorting to new methods of combatting "Communist influence." In face of these circumstances, our Party and our press are only making slow headway among these workers.

The same situation holds true for the light industries. Earlier, I spoke of the low political level of our work in many of the trade unions. I think this has something to do with the slow recruiting. We still seem to forget to relate the Party policies to daily occurrences in the shops and unions, and the need for building our Party in our daily contact with the workers, except at Party meetings.

The Party Builders' Congress proved that slow recruiting is not due to any lack of material for our Party but rather lack of systematic work in bringing the message of our Party daily to the workers.

Comrades, we are going to meet many difficulties as the reactionaries gird themselves for sharper attacks on the workers of America. The employers are working overtime to break the back of organized labor and defeat all progressive legislation. The enthusiasm of our Party members in challenging the fortress of open-shop reaction in steel, in transit, and in marine, must now be utilized for an equally important and even more difficult task. The task of leading the workers through these difficult depression times, leading the workers to resist the encroachment of fascism, leading the workers to build a Democratic Front today, and to lay the groundwork for the building of Socialism tomorrow.

The key is in the hands of our active trade union leaders. To do our task, we must become a larger Party, a Party rooted among the workers of basic industry, a Party the majority of whose members are industrial workers. As we noted before, the main objectives outlined in the last convention have been achieved. To achieve our new objectives, a powerful Party is necessary. I am sure our trade union comrades will seriously and cheerfully undertake this crucial task, that you will apply the knowledge and experience acquired in mass work to build the Party, our Party, for Freedom, Peace, Prosperity, and for Socialism.