

Errors in Unions Due to Running Too Far Ahead

About This Bulletin

This bulletin will appear every two weeks until the national convention in February. We urge members of the Communist Party to write articles and letters giving their views in the Party discussion. It should be borne in mind that this phase of the pre-convention discussion is based on the draft resolution issued by the National Committee.

The deadline for articles for each issue is two weeks before publication date. If at all possible, manuscripts should be typed (double space). Maximum length for articles will be 2,500 words, though the shorter the better. Every effort will be made to have each issue present varying points of view, cover a variety of topics and represent different parts of the country.

Articles must receive some identification. They must be sent through district offices with an accompanying note from the district (or from the section in cases where the sections are far from the district headquarters).

Copies of resolutions adopted by clubs, sections, districts, etc. should be sent in the same way as articles. Many of these will be printed. Suggested amendments to the draft resolution should likewise be sent to the Discussion Committee. These too will be printed when of general interest.

Address all mail and material to Discussion Committee, 101 W. 16th St., New York 11, N.Y.

winds are blowing throughout the Marxist world, is to dramatize how mechanically we have tried to apply the principles of scientific socialism—without full consideration of varying time, place and circumstance. This is the essence of doctrinairism.

The fruits of these dogmatic and doctrinaire errors should by

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By ROSE WORTIS

NEW YORK.

BECAUSE of my forced inactivity in the movement during the past few years, I have hesitated to participate in the Party Discussion. However, like thousands of others, I followed it with great interest. I am particularly concerned with that part of the discussion which seeks to evaluate our work, particularly our trade union work.

I have little sympathy with those who speak of wasted years. Any honest, unprejudiced historian of the American labor movement for the past 35 years must acknowledge the positive contributions made by our Party to the advancement of the labor movement during different periods, even though many of the younger generation of organized workers, who enjoy the benefits of our pioneering work are not aware of the important role played by the Left Wing and the Communists to help bring them about.

To mention but a few: (1) The role of the Communists, especially William Z. Foster, in discarding the disastrous policy of dual unionism which helped to bring the progressive workers back into the mainstream of the labor movement; (2) The mass campaign for the amalgamation of the craft unions, a campaign which involved hundreds of thousands of workers; (3) The pioneering work in the movement to organize the unorganized in the mass production industries, which was later of enormous help in the creation of the CIO; (4) The struggle of the unemployed for unemployment insurance, for the soldiers' bonus and for the Youth Act, etc.; (5) The struggle for Negro rights dramatized by the Scottsboro and Herndon cases; (6) The fight against racketeering and for de-



ROSE WORTIS

mocracy in the trade unions.

I shall never forget my experience at the founding convention of the CIO when I heard the program, which until then had been associated only with the Left Wing and Communists, being adopted as the official program of the newly organized labor movement. We can also take pride in the positive contribution we made to building anti-fascist unity before and during the second world war.

The most challenging question for me is how and why, in the face of these contributions during different periods since the birth of our Party, we made mistakes which led us in a leftist direction and destroyed the gains and the prestige we had won, leading us to isolation from the very movements we helped build and the people who worked closely with us.

It is in an effort to find an answer to these challenging questions that I am writing my piece. An examination of these problems out of my own experience leads me to believe that the main source of our Leftist mistakes—and I firmly believe they were Leftist—was and is an overestimation of the radicalization of the workers, a tendency to run far ahead of the masses

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Errors in Trade Unions Due to Running Too Far Ahead

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whose support we had on important immediate issues. This policy isolated us from these very people.

A FEW EXAMPLES

To cite a few pertinent examples: I mentioned earlier the amalgamation movement during the twenties, a mass movement in the real sense of the word. Our program rallied the support of some of the most important sections of the labor movement, such as the railroad unions, etc., because the workers realized that the craft unions no longer answered the needs of the mass production industries. It grew so fast that it required the personal intervention of Compers to stop this movement. However, our program also included the organization of a farmer-labor party, which the workers and the leaders of that movement were not ready for. Unmindful of this, we proceeded with the organization of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party in 1924 in Chicago.



This organization was neither labor nor farmer nor federated. The labor movement, which refused to join this Farmer-Labor Party, did officially endorse the LaFollette campaign. This was the only time that the AFL ever endorsed a third-party candidate.

This still-born Federated Farmer-Labor Party, far from advancing the movement for a third party, isolated the Left and brought about a split between them and other progressive forces such as Fitzpatrick, leader of the Chicago Federation of Labor, facilitating the efforts of the reactionaries to heighten their expulsion campaign against the Left in the unions. Again in the early thirties, on the initiative of the Left, we began organizing the unemployed and launched the campaign for unemployment insurance. The AFL (1931) was opposed to this as a "dole." Because these were issues of great concern to the workers, a new attitude developed towards the Left, and their positive contributions were widely recognized. But again, we did not know how to consolidate this influence.

When, after the depression years production was resumed, the workers began to clamor for organization. To meet this situation, the Roosevelt administration passed a number of measures, such as the NRA. The workers, eager for organization, grasped at this legislation, particularly Section 7A which they interpreted as giving them the right to organize into unions of their own choosing. But the Left, instead of linking itself with this sentiment of the workers for organization, denounced the NRA as a fascist measure, a position which could not be understood by the ordinary worker. The conservative leaders in

the trade unions followed a contrary policy. They characterized the NRA as a Magna Carta of labor and cashed in on it. Unions which had been reduced to skeleton organizations quickly became organizations of hundreds of thousands, such as the ILGWU, textile, etc. When the Supreme Court, under pressure of the reactionaries invalidated the NRA, we staged a demonstration also denouncing the NRA. Thus, in many industries the newly organized workers did not identify the Left with the advance of their unions.

We took a similar negative position towards the Wagner Act in its early stages, but fortunately corrected ourselves in a later period. I have often raised the question of evaluating our tactical line toward the NRA and the other New Deal legislation of that period. This was never done—not even in Comrade Foster's book on the Party.

AMERICAN LABOR PARTY

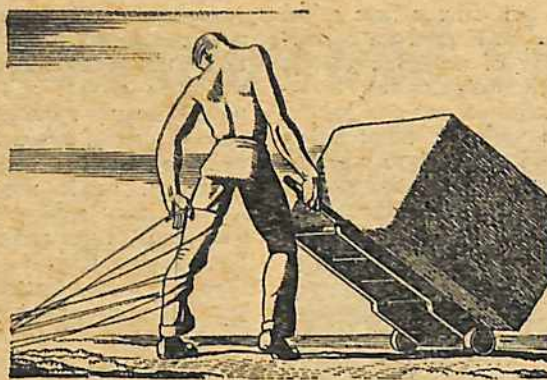
Another example, which may be very controversial, is the question of the American Labor Party in New York State. When the ALP was organized, it included both the Left and important right-wing unions. It is true that technically the Left later won the majority in the primaries. However, since we were well aware that the Left actually represented a minority of the affiliated unions, and we may say a minority of the membership, would it not have been better tactics knowing that Rose and Dubinsky were determined to split, for the Left to have worked as a minority in a united labor party rather than taking complete control of the leadership?

Now to come to more recent events—the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. We were definitely correct in opposing the Taft-Hartley Act and fighting together with the rest of the labor movement against its acceptance. However, we agreed that there might come a time when we would have to retreat. This was correct theory, but in its application we went off at a Left tangent.

When the most important trade unions agreed to sign the affidavit under protest and to work for its repeal, the unions under Left leadership persisted in the original policy, which the workers could not understand and considered foolhardy. This leftist policy led to the removal or resignation of the Left leaders in the unions. The policy was changed only after the Left lost leadership in many unions.

Much has been said about the premature organization of the Progressive Party which undoubtedly had its influence in sharpening the relationship between the Left and the other forces in the CIO and was a contributing factor in the expulsion of the Left unions. Here again we saw a repetition of the mistake made in the organization of the Farmer-Labor Party in 1924, supporting the organization of a third party which did not have the support of a goodly section of the organized labor movement.

Our policy and tactics in relation to the Marshall Plan brings to my mind some fundamental questions as to our methods of work in trade unions and other mass organizations. I believe that in the main our policy toward the Marshall Plan was correct. Some of our criticism was later substantiated by important trade union officials. The Left had a right and duty to fight for its position at the CIO convention in 1948. However, the majority of the delegates thought otherwise. They rejected the position of the Left and came out in favor of the Marshall Plan.



This required a readjustment of tactics so that the Left could continue to work for its position within the limits of the majority decision. Instead, Communists and other left-wingers proceeded as though no decision had been made, thus giving some semblance to the charge that we do not recognize majority decisions, that we have no organizational loyalty and recognize an authority over and above the organized labor movement.

UNION DISCIPLINE

The Left Wing confronted similar problems in many unions in relation not only to general political issues, but even ordinary trade union questions. It is a tradition in the American labor movement to have organized groupings around certain programs. Even such an old conservative union as the Typographical Union has organized groupings. The mistake of the Left which played into the hands of the reactionaries was to be careless about union discipline, about accepting majority decisions if they did not fully conform with the left-wing program.

In my own experience I can recall in the ILGWU such incidents. In 1923, at the expiration of the agreement in the dress industry, the union, under the inspiration of the left-wing forces, developed a series of demands for the employed. Among them was the demand for the 40-hour week and week work. After months of negotiation the leadership, under the pressure of the rank and file, concluded a compromise agreement gaining the 40-hour week but giving up the demand for week work.

It is true that this was a compromise settlement but it nevertheless registered an important gain. It was one of the first unions to establish the 40-hour week by agreement. Instead of recognizing this as a substantial victory and utilizing it to strengthen the union so as to prepare for the achievement of week work in the next agreement, we denounced the settlement as a sell-out, thus allowing the right-wing leadership to take credit for the establishment of the 40-hour week which properly belonged to the Left wing.

We saw a more recent example in the Transportation Workers Union in 1948 on the

question of the increased fare. The left-wing forces in the union were correct in opposing a policy of gaining wage increases for the transport workers at the expense of the rest of the community. However, the overwhelming majority of the transport workers thought otherwise. They were convinced that no increase was possible (perhaps wrongly) without an increase in fares.

After placing their position before the membership, the Left forces in the Union, in my opinion, should have been guided by the will and decision of the majority of the membership. Instead, they continued to advocate their own position, thus playing into the hands of those who were maneuvering to split away from the Left-wing forces in the labor movement.

What conclusions must we draw from these experiences? We must learn to distinguish between our own advanced program and such issues on which the workers are ready to follow us. It is necessary to convince the workers of the correctness and practicability of our advanced program.

How do we explain the fact that many of our experienced trade union comrades allowed themselves to make such mistakes? I think, in the main, it was due to the fact that the comrades somehow felt that the Party must go on fighting for its program irrespective of the response it gets even among the most advanced sections of the workers. Indirectly this expressed a sort of patronizing and superior attitude towards the workers, an attitude which in effect said that even on practical day-to-day problems of the mass organizations, we know best what is good for you.

If we want to reestablish our influence and prestige among the masses, it is not only necessary for us to be the best builders of the organizations, but also to show that we are the most disciplined. While not giving up our program we have to learn how to work within the limits of the democratic decisions of the organizations.

PARTY ORGANIZATION

Now a word on the questions of party organization and methods of leadership. I think we

must do away with the conception of the all-wise ones who have an answer to every problem. No important decision should be made in any field without prior discussion and consultation with the people most directly involved. I felt somewhat annoyed while reading Comrade Dennis' report about the mistakes of the Left in trade-union work. Many of these decisions met with little enthusiasm on the part of the trade union comrades and were often accepted merely as a matter of discipline.

Another point is the selection of leadership for work in the various fields. I think such leaders should be chosen in the first place from the particular field of activity and also through discussion and consultation with those of our comrades most directly involved. I know of many instances where changes in leadership were made that would never have been approved had the group been consulted about the new leadership.

I do not wish to minimize the crisis which the Party is experiencing now. I do not look forward to miraculous improvements in the immediate future, but I do think that the present self-critical discussion and the proposed improved methods of work will help. The democratization of the Party, the greater readiness on the part of our comrades and the leadership to have our ear to the ground, will definitely help us make a comeback as a constructive force in advancing the welfare of the people.

I agree with the perspective of a mass party of socialism in the U. S., but I do not see the conditions for the emergence of such a Party in the immediate future. Any attempt to rush such a development will, in my opinion, result in repeating some of our Leftist mistakes all over again. I think we should do all in our power to strengthen our Party. In doing so we will create one of the effective forces necessary for the building of such a party of socialism in the U. S.



Emphasis on Imminent War Disarmed the Party

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ism, as well as under capitalism.

4.—We had thrown out the splendid advances made from 1935 to 1939 in connection with the great American tradition.

I also said in the memo that we should be staunch enough friends of the Soviet Union to be able to criticize them when wrong things took place there. "Above all," I wrote, "it should be clear to us and to the world that we copy no one, that we operate within the framework of a universal science of Marxism, but that science remains science only if it is developed here on the basis of our own history and conditions."

In that memo I argued that we did not contribute sufficiently to the exposure of Wall Street imperialism and to the fight for

peace, because we did not see that the greater strength of the forces of peace over war was based on the following factors:

- 1.—Socialism was now a world system, not confined to one country, but including one-third of the world.
- 2.—The anti-imperialist camp had been strengthened by the independence won not only by China, but India, Indonesia, etc.
- 3.—The strengthening of the Soviet Union, which included their mastery of the A-and H-bomb.
- 4.—World peace sentiment and the struggle for peace.
- 5.—The conflicts among the capitalist powers.

That memo became a subject for constant slander and attacks against me and my alleged position by Comrade Foster. But the Party members could get no ink-

ling of what I actually said in this memorandum, so fearful were we at that time of free discussion. I don't pretend that all I wrote in that memo stands up. I wouldn't quote Stalin today as I did then, to give but one example of its shortcomings.

Still the views expressed anticipated much that was accepted only after the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. How tragic that the critical and frank reappraisal of so many political and theoretical questions could take place only after that Congress.

But because the draft resolution strongly affirms the right of free exchange of opinion and democratic procedure I believe we can repair the damage caused in the last ten years.