

# The Meaning of the Wage Cutting Offensive

By JOSEPH ZACK

WHAT is new for us in the new low level reached by the crisis? Some comrades think that there is practically nothing new, and there is not much to discuss. However, there is the following that is new, and that is amongst other things, the brazen announcement of an open wage cutting campaign by the leading corporations, like United States Steel, railroads, automobile, etc. Let us examine this new development on the basis of the line of the Plenum of the Central Committee.

It seems to me that the best way to see the significance to us of this new development is to take up concretely the effect this has had thus far upon the working class, for instance, the fine response of the workers to our mass meetings in the heavy industrial centers, the rapid growth of the membership of the Trade Union Unity League and the Party in these centers, so much so that the Pittsburgh district is about to become the second largest district in the Party. We see spontaneous strikes in large scale plants in various parts of the country. What does this mean to us? It means that the wage cuts are stirring up the basic sections of the proletariat, the most backward sections that have very little tradition even in the most elementary forms of class struggle. It means that we have now a real broad basis for building up the revolutionary trade unions and that the objective situation created through the wage cuts now opens up to us the doors of heavy and large scale industry more than ever, *that it gives us the practical basis for executing the re-orientation towards big industry that we have been striving for a long time.* The truth of this was emphasized by the character of the discussion of the Pittsburgh plenum of the National Committee of the T. U. U. L., and the representation that was there, principally from heavy industry.

## NEW EXPERIENCES, NEW METHODS

The discussion at the Pittsburgh plenum was almost entirely along the lines of what organizing methods to use *in the immediate future in large scale plants.* Some preliminary experiences have been registered in the discussion but the problem *how to do it in*

*practice* still lays before us. That is, we have to yet learn organizing methods that are practical for this type of industry. Most of our experiences in the past were in light and small shop industry. Theoretically we spoke very much about all these problems in the past, *but now we are facing them more than ever in an immediate practical sense.* The question of conducting national organizing campaigns of preparing the masses for a national strike movement, the question of stimulating local strikes as the starting spark, woven in and taking place in the midst of a national strike movement these are some of the immediate concrete and practical problems that we must solve now. All of which means that we must seek for new organizing methods, must look upon strike strategy from a point of view of trustified and large scale industry that is, solve in the immediate future problems that before we conceived only theoretically.

#### DEFENSIVE STRUGGLE

Due to the fact that the big masses of workers, particularly in the heavy and large scale industry, are unorganized, the struggle that is now brewing against the wage cuts, further speed-up and layoffs, will be essentially a defensive struggle. That is, a struggle to force the bourgeoisie to withdraw the wage cuts. In this struggle our task is to establish a minimum organization in the form of entrenchment of the revolutionary unions through individual recruiting, obtain wherever possible recognition of shop committees, and the settlement of minor grievances in the various plants and departments of the plants, etc. The extension of our influence that the defensive struggle offers to us, be it against the wage cuts or other grievances, the possibilities of a vast extension of our organization in the course of this defensive struggle lays the basis for struggles of the character of counter-offensive later on. Therefore, it is of greatest importance to clearly understand what results can be expected from a defensive struggle, not to confuse aims suited to a defensive struggle with those of the counter-offensive, etc. Of course, this does not mean that as soon as the strike wave develops in big industry that in some of the small scale industries there will not take place strikes that assume the character of a counter-offensive. Neither does it exclude the possibilities in the case of real mass response of the workers even in large scale industries of the possibility of winning some demands characteristic of a counter-offensive. This does not basically change the fact that the struggle that we are now facing is in the main of a defensive nature.

## PARTIAL DEMANDS AND PARTIAL STRIKES

Not the least confusion has been registered in practice and even in theory in our movement as to what can be won through partial strikes and what constitutes partial demands. It depends, however, to a large extent upon the understanding of this question whether we can win the strikes in the present period and whether we can apply successfully the tactic of organized retreat. Partial immediate demands in heavy trustified industry cannot be the same as in small shop industry. In small shop industry we can win relatively important demands through local and small strikes. In trustified industry this is impossible. There, demands that can be won through small fights must be largely of a nature that aim to eliminate vicious abuses, arbitrariness and discrimination in the various departments and plants and in some instances, even changes in piece rates, sectional wage cuts, further speed-up in departments or plants, etc. But basic demands as to scale of wages, working hours, etc., affecting the whole industry cannot be won through partial strikes. The partial demands in large scale but untrustified industry are again of somewhat different nature. Here the greater division among the boss class can be taken advantage of in putting forward more important demands, although not of such a basic nature as in the small shop industry. Our experiences which are based largely on small shop industry and on untrustified large scale plant industry (as, for instance, textile), cannot be mechanically applied to trustified industry like steel, without making some of the most serious blunders in the preparation of the strike and in the conduct of it.

## STRUGGLE AGAINST UNEMPLOYMENT

This question also presents itself now with somewhat different aspects. Until now, that is, from the time of the outbreak of the crisis, till some time ago the employed workers did not stir very much. The reduction in their wages took place in the form of reduction in the number of days employed, in sweating them more for the same pay, in isolated wage cuts, etc. But now we see already even from the few weeks since the wage cutting campaign is in effect the brewings of mass resistance and numerous strikes against wage cuts already going on. This registers the fact that all the maneuverings of the bosses in the past against the standard of living of the workers have reduced the conditions of the employed to such a point that they will not stand against further reduction without a fight, but the question as to what attitude the unemployed who are starved out more than ever will take in these strike is yet to be seen and depends to a large extent upon more

effective struggle on our part on this question. There is no doubt that the bourgeoisie through the relief machinery that is being created will try to bring direct pressure upon the unemployed to break the strikes, playing upon division between the employed and unemployed and utilizing the A. F. of L. as the lever to use these starved masses in order to break strikes on a large scale.

There is great danger in the fact that the bourgeoisie through the tremendous demagoguery conducted in the press for the past few months on the question of charity relief has really created big illusions among the masses, and this in spite of the fact that even if we assume that the amount spent for charity relief this winter be double the amount spent last winter, the part that each unemployed worker would receive would not be more than \$30 a year—a very insignificant economic basis for the gigantic demagoguery the bourgeoisie is making of this question, the purpose of which is to put a damper upon the further development of militancy on the part of the unemployed.

All in all however, due to the unorganized condition of the masses, the bourgeoisie has been able to create an impression that it is preparing for something serious to relieve the unemployed, and by that means it is trying to demoralize the independent struggle of the unemployed and take the initiative in its own hands, in order to utilize the unemployed in its efforts to enforce the wage cuts.

What have been our shortcomings on this question? Our shortcomings have been concentration almost exclusively upon propaganda and demonstrations designed to get basic relief from the state in the form of social insurance with no linking up with concrete immediate struggle against the lay-offs—when millions were laid off—and for organization of struggle to obtain immediate relief. The result is that very many of the unemployed see in our program for insurance something worth while to fight for but not something to benefit from right now. That is, we have not been able to successfully link our struggle for unemployment insurance with struggle and organization for concrete immediate relief and struggle against the lay-offs. If we do not strain every bit of our ability and strength to overcome these shortcomings in the shortest possible time there is the danger that the bourgeoisie directly or through their A. F. of L. lieutenants will be able to utilize the unemployed for its own ends. We have through demonstrations and propaganda activities already forced the bourgeoisie to take the question of relief much more seriously, but we have left the organization of direct relief entirely to the bourgeoisie itself. We can by making a turn on this question oblige the bourgeois to give much more than

they are contemplating now, but we should also undertake to organize distribution of relief ourselves directly, through the unemployed councils and the Workers International Relief. There is no reason why through organized pressure we should not be able to collect the major part of this relief from the bourgeoisie itself, from the neighborhood stores, from the bosses in industry, from practical steps to prevent evictions and lay-offs, from pressure against the swollen treasuries of the A. F. of L. bureaucracy, by the introduction of the rotation system on jobs in trades where the highly paid labor aristocracy predominates, and where we usually have a few thousand having jobs of 60 to 80 dollars a week while double that number, members of the union in the same trade are starving to death. The question of reducing the salaries of the A. F. of L. bureaucrats, of exempting the unemployed from dues payments and assessments, and utilizing those funds for the members mostly in need of it—all these methods of obtaining immediate direct relief, and a movement organized around it by us, will make it possible to maintain thousands of the more militant workers around us in militant mood and as an organized army to struggle for the more basic points of our program. It will also give the big masses of unemployed that do not want to be used as strike breakers an alternative between stark starvation and scabbing by seeing that they can receive relief through the unemployed council organization and W.I.R.

The further intensification of our struggle for unemployed insurance, and this practical measures to avoid the unemployed being used as scabs to break the strikes against wage cuts is possible now only by concentrating all efforts upon getting immediate relief for the unemployed, not only through more pressure upon bourgeois relief agencies but *by organizing relief ourselves along the lines outlined*. Our own trade union organization in particular should be able to organize struggles against lay-offs at the point of production, by organizing demonstrations in front of the places that lay off workers and drawing all workers in the plant in solidarity movements against it, and wherever we cannot succeed in preventing the lay-offs at least obtain winter relief, that is, a certain lump sum paid by the boss to the laid-off worker, etc. Only in this manner will we be able to affect practically the necessary solidarity between the employed and unemployed workers in the coming struggle against the wage cutting drive of the exploiters and the capitalist state.

#### STRUGGLE AGAINST SOCIAL FASCISTS

With the announcement of the brazen wage cutting campaign the bourgeoisie definitely abandons the theory of high wages which

was the main prop of class collaboration and the hold of the labor fakers upon the masses. This means that the maneuvering base of the bourgeoisie and their labor lieutenants among the working class narrows down. The bourgeoisie does not hold forth any more promises of concessions but on the contrary, brazenly announces its determination to slash down ruthlessly the workers' standard of living. The labor fakers now have only one means of keeping hold ideologically of the masses, and that is by the most audacious "left" demagogy. Outside of that they have nothing to give and nothing to offer. This is already noticeable in the demagogy of many of the labor fakers on social insurance and relief, in the increasing use of the Gitlows and Mustes, in the endorsement of strikes that break out spontaneously or are organized and led by us so that they can break these strikes from within, etc.

The narrowing of the maneuvering base of the labor lieutenants of the bourgeoisie among the working class means at the same time a broadening of our base. The organizational crystallization of these broad possibilities opening up before us is possible by the careful application of *united front policy from below*. We had already some interesting experiences on this question, and although this experience was in a small shop industry, that is, the furriers, we defeated completely the fakers who tried to confuse the workers with "unity" maneuvers from the top. What was the main approach in this case? The main approach was that we proposed to unite the workers irrespective of to what union they belong, or to no union at all, on the question of immediate struggle against the boss for improvements in pay, etc., while the fakers, following the Lovestoneite policy, made "unity" from the top on the basis of *dues*, that is, as to where the workers should pay dues, in the A. F. of L. or in our union. The workers seeing that we were the only ones really sincere in uniting them against the boss quickly understood these sham maneuvers of the fakers and came over in mass accepting our leadership. We went to the so-called "unity" conferences called by the "left" fig leaves of the fakers, proposing openly this program previously discussed in mass meetings of the workers. The fakers who could not afford to antagonize their chief upholders, the bosses, could not afford to accept this program. Thus the workers, seeing quickly by themselves who honestly fights for their interest, who wants to unite them, *and who only maneuvers* with "unity" in order to keep them divided, were able to orientate themselves quickly.

However, although the economic base for the maneuvering of the labor fakers has considerably narrowed down with the advent of the open wage cutting campaign, still we must be on our guard

not to under-estimate the strength of the fakers as a strike-breaking instrument in the hands of the bosses. We must keep in mind that the American working class, in spite of all the militant brewings of mass resistance and radicalization that manifests themselves more and more every day is politically tremendously backward. Its tradition is mainly in struggles along economic lines. Tremendous masses of them have never participated in any kind of direct struggle against the exploiters. They are hard pressed by the crisis and can therefore be taken in demoralized and confused by the "left" demagoguery and tactics used by the fakers in strike situations, especially when they use types like Gitlow as camouflage for their strike breaking methods. However, the very interference of the A. F. of L. fakers in this manner gives us, if properly utilized, an opportunity to conduct in a practical manner intense political education, which in this case we can make through practical class struggle maneuvers as well as through the accompanying theoretical education when masses are involved in the struggle for bread and are deeply interested and thus make them really understand the basic differences between our class struggle policy and their class collaboration maneuvers, make them understand what the Communist Party and the T.U.U.L. stands for, whom it represents, etc., and by this strengthen considerably the influence of the Party and the recruitment of new members into its ranks and into the revolutionary unions.

#### INTO THE CAMP OF THE ENEMY

The pressure of the crisis and of the wage-cutting campaign upon the unions based on the labor aristocracy creates for us a broad base for the extension of our activities inside of the A. F. of L. itself, right in the heart of the social fascist camp. Upon this extension of activities depends to a large extent our effectiveness crippling the strike breaking activities of the A. F. of L. fakers. There is already noticeable strong symptoms of disintegration, numerous clique formations inside of the A. F. of L. unions, even splits led by these cliques. The problem how to organize the demoralization that is going on inside the A. F. of L., bring the workers over to us in an organized manner through the inter-linking of correct united front tactics inside with our united front tactics among the unorganized, bringing them over not only under our ideological but the most important, under our organizational control, these are the problems we are faced with in the further development of our united front policy. *The correct and widespread application of the united front policy in approaching the unorganized in linking them up with the organized inside and outside of the A. F. of L. in*

*bringing them over under our organizational control through the united front tactic, is the key for our organizational approach to these masses the building up of strong industrial unions affiliated to the T.U.U.L. and the practical and ideological defeat of the fascists and social fascists in the labor movement.* Opportunist least-resistance methods and "left" sectarianism in the application of the united front policy must be combatted more than ever.

The question how to organize youth in industry employed and unemployed becomes also more important with the deepening of the crisis. We have already seen in many of the defensive strikes that have developed in the last few months that the young workers—even where they respond militantly in the first dash of struggle—easily fall victims to bourgeois and social-fascist demagoguery. This is due to the fact that all the bourgeois bunk pumped into their young heads is still very fresh in their minds. They have not become malicious through numerous disappointments, experienced by themselves in life, as the older workers have, and while very often they respond to militant tactics more readily they do not stay solid. The question how to approach this type of workers, how to handle them, the type of propaganda to use, how to organize them, assumes greater importance than ever. The backwardness of the Y.C.L. in this respect cannot be tolerated any longer. If things continue as they are, the youth element will not only be used increasingly as fascist shock troops by the bourgeoisie but will become an obstacle to the development of even defensive struggles. The same thing in a different sense can be said about women who are new-comers to industry, and about Negroes. The question of working our special demands, the question of those organizations who have specialized experiences as to how to handle these categories of workers, coming immediately into strike situations, gathering their fresh experiences, formulating special demands, and learning how to work more and more effectively in attracting these categories of workers to the class struggle becomes more and more important in the proportion that we are confronted with struggles in big plants where enormous masses of these workers are employed.

#### THE PARTY

In the proportion that broader and broader sections of the workers, particularly of large scale industry become involved in the struggle against wage-cuts and unemployment, it becomes necessary to politicalize these elementary struggles. The fact, however, is that although we speak very much about strikes assuming a political character in the third period, in practice when we enter into a strike situation we look upon it pretty much in the old trade-unionist



fashion. Our Party transforms itself into a *strike Party* and the politics we leave pretty much to everybody else. Our strategy takes in all kinds of maneuvers in the industry itself but not outside of it. The question of mobilizing the workers not directly involved in the strike and the people exploited by big capital, petty bourgeoisie, etc., is not even taken into consideration in practice. We do not develop political struggle under the leadership and initiative of the Party, around the numerous political issues that always accompany and arise out of the strike situation. The Party as a Party is liquidated and dissolved in the strike machinery. It is a curious fact that after we lead a big strike movement in this fashion we are left with a Party that is not any stronger than before the strike, that we do not absorb into the Party the militant elements that step forward during the strike. The Party extends its influence as a strike Party but, as a political leading force in the class struggle, it remains at the same spot as before.

This situation is largely due to the fact that our own comrades do not see any usefulness in the participation of the Party as such, *as a political force*, in the immediate strike struggle, and because of that they retreat before the bourgeoisified ideology of the masses. They themselves look upon the Party with sectarian eyes as a good instrument to organize the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat, but not as a class Party of the working class which can be a powerful instrument in the organization of immediate political struggles in support of the strike. With this kind of an outlook, they are incapable, of course, to politicalize the struggle and attract into the Party the fresh elements out of the ranks of the workers that come forward during the strike. The fact that the backbone of the movement, *the Party*, does not become strengthened in these struggles results usually in the liquidation of the trade unions developed as a result of the struggle. Those unions without the strong backbone of the Party cannot resist the terrific pressure of monopoly capital during the crisis, thus leaving us organizationally usually way behind of the development of the struggle itself, making it impossible in future struggles to plan ahead because of failure to develop sufficient organization upon which to base the future counter-offensive of the working class. If this situation is not radically remedied we will ride into a defeat all along the line and we will have the intolerable situation of having led big struggles during the crisis with enormous masses stirring for struggle, possibilities of tremendously extending these struggles, but with the Party and the T.U.U.L. remaining behind organizationally with practically the same number of members and the revolutionary trade unions very weak. The question of making a tremendous effort in the coming membership recruiting campaign in at least

doubling and trebling the number of Party members, of getting at least 100,000 in the T.U.U.L., making the turn in this recruiting campaign, in the method of bringing the Party forward in the immediate struggles as a political force, so that later on we will learn more how to draw fresh elements into the Party in our everyday activities — is the outstanding question in building up the organizational strength of the Party and the revolutionary trade unions.

#### CONCLUSION

The desperation of the masses under the pressure of the crisis will in the United States too bring forward more and more the development of fascist methods by the bourgeoisie and the blossoming forth of large scale fascist demagoguery. The desperate masses will here too more and more strike for an immediate remedy for their misery, and this immediate remedy they will seek through immediate and rapid changes which the fascist demagogues will promise them camouflaged with "left" phrases. The weaker the Party organizationally, the more backward in its ability to unite the teeming masses provoked into action by starvation, the more danger there is for them succumbing to fascist demagoguery. The deepening of the crisis makes this danger so much greater. To rapidly reorientate our work on the basis of the new possibilities, to intensify and extend the politicalization of our own units so that they can become leaders in the immediate political struggles around the big movements that will develop against the wage-cuts and unemployment, to struggle ruthlessly against all "left" sectarian tendencies, opportunist vacillations, against tendencies to look upon the looming defensive struggles as a retreat, as a part and parcel of really effecting the reorientation towards the development of a mass Party and of the Party becoming not only effective propagandist but organizer of the masses—in these tasks we are disgustingly behind in comparison with the objective situation. This is the significance to us of the new low level reached by the world economic crisis and from which flows the imperative necessity of quickening the tempo of application of the decisions of the Thirteenth Plenum of the Central Committee.