

# How to Apply the Open Letter

By J. A. ZACK

NOTE: *Comrade Zack raises in the following article a question that affects centrally the task of rooting the Party in the factories. If Comrade Zack desires to stress the necessity for issuing shop papers that really reflect the life and the problems of the workers, there can, of course, be no quarrel with him. The conclusion one must draw from bad instances of shop paper work is that such shop papers should be improved. But it seems to us, from his article, that Comrade Zack does not understand the necessity for developing our papers in every shop where the Party has a nucleus or sufficient contacts with the workers. We repeat: first in importance is the shop paper of the Party. The counterposing of Party shop papers to trade union papers is not permissible and constitutes an opportunist underestimation of the role of the Party in the shop. Where the situation demands it, a union paper can also be issued, but never at the expense of the shop paper issued by the Party.—Editor.*

THOSE of our Party members who have been most active for the last few years in trade union work are most satisfied with the Open Letter, since it is possible now, much more than ever before, to throw the entire strength of the movement behind the realization of our main line—to organize the workers in the basic industries.

The Letter states that “the progress made in various activities amongst the proletariat . . . is not basic as long as we do not make progress along the main line, the main strategic line, which is to penetrate the factory proletariat”.

Now, this does not mean that we are going to give up working along all other fronts such as among the unemployed, the small home owners, farmers, I.W.O., etc., but it does mean that we should utilize the bases we have established among the workers in these types of organizations for the purpose of realizing our main line, in the course of which we shall also transform these organizations so that they will grow on a new foundation.

The bourgeoisie of this country is now making certain maneuvers that particularly affect the factory workers, and it is possible

for us to utilize these maneuvers in order to realize our main strategic line in the factories. It is now possible for us, due to the fact that every factory worker is deeply concerned with the measures of the government as expressed in the Recovery Act, to carry on a tremendous campaign, a uniform campaign, against the government—the government that is trying to impose upon every worker a lower wage scale and has already succeeded in imposing higher prices for food and living. Until now we have had to expose each boss separately in every factory. Now, by exposing these measures of the government, we expose the general capitalist program as embodied in the N.R.A., and through such exposures, entrench ourselves among the workers.

This necessitates the re-examination of many of our old methods of work and their adaptation to this new situation. We have been too much in the habit of thinking that merely agitating for our program means leadership. We know from the unemployed movement that simply formulating a program and putting down demands does not constitute leadership. And those of us who are active in organizing factory workers know from long experience that agitating for a program is barely the first step. Methods of work, tactics, forms of organization, strategy, problems met in the course of concrete work—these are the things that put life into the program and, taken together, constitute leadership.

#### CONCENTRATION

Before I touch on the question of our methods, I want to say a word on concentration. According to the Letter, our entire movement, every unit, section, and organization now under our influence, is to concentrate upon the main strategic task, that is, to tackle a factory, or to organize the unemployed, or both, around a specific factory or neighborhood. The internal life of the unit and its whole development is to be shaped on the basis of what it can do and how it can fulfill the task of organizing a factory and building the Party inside of it.

But within this general line of organizing the factory workers, we are to concentrate particularly on certain basic industries—steel, metal, transport; in this District (Ohio), also rubber, coal, etc. In the course of our work among all categories of workers, we must concentrate politically against labor fakers of all varieties. Without such political concentration we cannot bring to effective fruition any of our work; the labor fakers will muddle and confuse the workers and take them away from us. This means also the build-

ing of oppositions inside the A. F. of L. and other organizations; not only agitating, but organizing to bring the workers into effective independent action.

Now, if we understand concentration in this sense, that is, that we must take all necessary organizational measures to realize that concentration, put the entire movement behind it—*not only leading committees*, but every Party member and every sympathizer, through our fractions in the mass organizations—then there is something to do for everybody in all of our organizations.

In the past, we have attempted many schemes of concentration, according to which so and so many were to concentrate (10 or 15 members, or a member of the Section or District Buro), and, of course, even this kind of narrow concentration was not carried out properly. But the Open Letter directs us clearly to concentrate our entire forces on realizing our main task; that is, the organizing of the workers in the factories, and at a given factory strategically selected.

The question is, therefore, how to mobilize for this task.

#### OUR WORK AMONG THE UNEMPLOYED

The unemployed organizations, particularly in a district like Ohio, have many contacts with factory workers. We must utilize these forces, developed in our unemployed work, which know about organizing, and have become tacticians in the course of the struggle, for organizing the factory workers. Here is an opportunity for us to utilize the experienced forces in the Party and those we have developed among the unemployed, in order to realize our main strategic task.

In connection with our work among the unemployed, it will be necessary for us to adjust our methods to the present conditions created by the N.R.A.

The workers now on relief jobs who want to get cash pay or more pay to meet the increased cost of living under the N.R.A., must be led by us, jointly with the factory workers, into strike struggles for better conditions. There is a greater degree of intertwining now possible between employed and unemployed because of temporary fluctuations in employment, which can be utilized to develop economic struggles both among the employed and the unemployed.

#### HOW TO INVOLVE PARTY MEMBERS

Mechanical resolutions will not help, even after we make an ideological campaign, nor will registrations of members according

to industrial occupation. Usually this produces only so much paper. The way to get the members of the various organizations mobilized for factory work is by organizing them where they work. On this basis, also, we can get them to join the respective trade union to which they should belong.

If we line them up in this way, we shall succeed, not only in forming them into organizing groups, but in holding them as well. The result of this type of approach will be to spread out tremendously the organizing movement, already started on a very small scale, and to enlist the total of our forces, step by step, unit by unit, organization by organization.

#### MORE AUDACITY—FASTER!

As to the question of tempo, we have been educated and have, in turn, educated all our Party members to a sort of slow motion; to secret, double secret, underground factory organization tactics. While a great deal of this was essentially correct a year ago, today it is no longer correct. Why? Because the masses of workers are now thinking about organization. The increasing cost of living is impressing the need of organization upon them. They are moving at a faster tempo than they were six months ago in organizing themselves. If we do not adjust our tactics to these new moods of the masses, we will simply remain behind, and the labor fakers, who now are using very open tactics, will be the ones who will get a hold on these moving masses. Therefore, the question of how to increase our tempo of organization inside the factories, of being bolder on the question of strikes, is now one of our key problems.

Here, in Cleveland, we have had various kinds of spontaneous strikes. How were they called? Usually by a group of workers in one department organizing themselves and walking out. The sentiment in the factories was such that in most cases, after one department walked out and placed a picket line in front of the plant, the rest of the factory walked out. It proved that, despite the fact that the workers had very little organization inside, they were able spontaneously to stop the entire plant in most of the cases. The lesson we should draw from this is that we must re-educate ourselves on the question of tactics and methods to proceed more openly and aggressively.

#### FIRST STEPS IN FACTORY POLITICS

The question of first steps is very important. Even assuming that a unit picks out a point of concentration, or a language organ-

ization picks out a factory in order to recruit from among its nationality in the factory, very serious errors may be made. What is the customary idea about first steps? To hold a gate meeting, and distribute leaflets in the name of the T.U.U.L. or the S.M.W. I.U.; and to keep on distributing leaflets and holding gate meetings. This is the agitational method. Well, what do you think the reaction of the workers will be? In most cases they will be afraid that our actions are premature. If the boss exerts pressure, they will not attend these meetings in mass, since they have no feeling yet of strength. They will walk past, or perhaps listen for a few minutes. A worker figures these things out on a practical basis. So far as joining or signing up at the gate, practically none will do so. Maybe some "stool" who has been attending will sign up with some workers. *The tendency of the workers, when agitation of this kind is used, is to organize on the sly.* The workers want to organize in such fashion that the boss does not know exactly what they are doing until they feel strong enough. The boss may know all about it, but they want to believe that it is hard for the boss to get at it. They want to surprise the boss with a certain degree of organization. They want to feel that they are putting something over on him.

If we do not take this mood into consideration, then we shall never organize them, even if they work for 10c an hour and 15 hours a day. The point I wish to make is this: Don't feel so sure that street corner methods are the only methods to organize factory workers. When you get a group of workers, listen to their suggestions on organization. They may not be able to express them well, but they often have valuable ideas. Utilize them, and you will get organization. I am not speaking theoretically. I am speaking on the basis of experiences we have had right here, and on this basis we have been able to sign up almost 3,000 workers to date.

In some cases we have to be bolder, where the workers are "raring" to go. As a rule they will not make counter-motions in meetings; but, unless convinced of the practicability of our proposals, they will sit back and do nothing. We shall be leaders only when we have learned to know in practice how and when to make a bold frontal attack, and when to make side maneuvers or preparatory steps when the workers are not ready for more direct action. Flexible methods of organization which keep the workers on the move, and methods which appeal to them as practical, are what make for leadership and solid ties with the masses.

Here in Cleveland we have not called a single open meeting until we have been reasonably certain that the workers were ready to come to it.

## THE UNION IS NOT THE PARTY

On the question of how to unite the workers in economic struggles and organization, it is clear that we must start with the workers as they are, no matter how backward, or what conceptions they have. The workers, for the most part, are Democrats, Republicans, Catholics, Presbyterians, and what not. Some of our union books, with their preambles on organization, presuppose too high a degree of class consciousness, and are more a hindrance than an aid. Often these workers, because of their political backwardness, are very much impressed by the "red scare"; they do not trust us politically because the T.U.U.L. has been painted as the C. P. in industry. We must make them feel that the T.U.U.L., as a class struggle union, can include all workers.

The bosses' "red scare" is at times effective, not only because of the general political backwardness of the workers in many industries, but also because of our sectarian, unpopular approach. The boss wants to divide the workers with the "red scare" into camps of radicals and conservatives. If he must recognize a union, it must be one without Communists, and with "his boys" leading it, if possible. This, too, is the idea of the A. F. of L. leaders, who play the bosses' game.

There are two ways of meeting the "red scare". One is to retreat, which leads to capitulation before the enemy. The other is to meet it head-on, in a popular fashion. Tell the workers what the boss is aiming at, that he wants to eliminate the more experienced, radical element in order to render the strike impotent and to demoralize the organization, and that we stand for unity irrespective of political views, color, or religion in the union; that we are for workers' democracy and equality in the union. Different political views can and should be discussed inside the union to clarify the workers, but each can vote according to his views so long as all stick together to protect the workers' interests against the boss. Here I am discussing this question only generally. In practice each situation has its variations. In some cases, due to the "red scare", or the insufficient confidence of the workers, we cannot get them to affiliate with the T.U.U.L., in which case we must be flexible enough to remain with them, even if they organize into an independent union, and we must continue to work for affiliation.

## NO "CIRCULAR" LEADERSHIP

We must use flexibility in organizing workers in industry. *Uniformity and "circular" leadership* do not work. Whatever flexibility

we adopt should be for the purpose of leading workers in struggle. Our methods must be mass methods. Thus we can get organization among factory workers, make them class conscious, and bring them step by step into the Party.

Demands are important in uniting workers in factories. You can put up many demands that are perfectly correct; you can justify them and say that the workers are entitled to them; but, if the workers do not consider these demands reasonable and practical, you will not get a united struggle for them. Sometimes, when the more radicalized workers are present at the meeting, you can get them to vote for practically the whole program. But in order to unite the workers, no matter what their prejudices are, the demands must be of such a nature as to induce practically all to fight for them; otherwise, you will fail.

Now, as to the question of how to settle strikes. Workers will usually put up higher demands than they can get, because they know the boss will beat them down. But if the boss accedes to half of what they ask for or a little bit more, then there will be an entirely different reaction among the workers. When they get half or three-fourths of their demands, they say: "Let us take the bird we have in hand, rather than chase the one in the bush. Let us take this; later we can come back for more." If we do not pay attention to this change of mood after waging a successful struggle, we may create a split among the workers and may lose the demands we have won. Leaders, therefore, must sense these changes, for the workers do not offer resolutions or debates on such attitudes. They may let us know through personal talk or through the reception the matter gets from the majority. In one way or another we, as leaders, must know what is what, and not wait for theses. We must know what the average worker is ready to fight for, and at the same time try to attract and draw the more radical workers closer to us, to transmit to them more of our program and strategy. This we may do by forming groups of actives, radical groups, or a class on organization with them, drawing them into leadership in the union, and at the same time, preparing them for membership in the Party.

#### BUILDING THE PARTY

This brings us to the question of building the Party. I have been speaking here as a union organizer and of methods of organizing average workers. This is very important, but we should not transform ourselves into merely trade union organizers. The political work of the Party, while of course not disassociated from all

of these union methods, is much more than just that. We must bring it in, in a way that will help us build both union and Party factory organizations. In Ohio, at least 75 per cent of our members are unemployed. There are practically no Party members in any of the plants where we have union organization. We have some sympathizers, but not Party members. The Party strength, as far as industry is concerned, is next to nothing. We know, however, that where we organize a union in a plant, unless we politicize the workers and organize a Party group inside to counteract the enemy forces, we shall not maintain our position.

#### THE UNION IS THE BRIDGE TO THE MASSES

One of our major difficulties is that, on the whole, most of our leading functionaries do not consider the union as the great bridge to the masses in industry. They somehow hold to the theory that the Party must be built first in the factory, then the union. This assumption presupposes that the masses will join the Party first as a result of a mass of theoretical agitational activity around the factory and not as a result of the development and organization of every-day activity and economic struggles. *Thus the concept develops that the Party is built, not in the struggle, but on the side of it.* We, as the vanguard, interpret the events for the masses and draw for them doctoral and professional conclusions, thus forming "theoretical" groups on an utterly sectarian conception, and such groups as have been built, stand in this utterly sectarian conception. Thus has the mass of the Party's factory work been done in the past. As a result of this policy, hundreds of factory units and factory papers have gone on the rocks, thereby retarding the building of both the Party and the union.

The problem is how to build the Party, not apart from, but in the course of building mass struggles and mass organization in industry. This can be done without in any way confusing or submerging the identity of the Party into the union, or that of the union into the Party.

Take the case of the N.R.A. The workers had many illusions about it in the beginning. The union, therefore, could not speak the same language as the Party without isolating itself from the workers. Here the clear leading voice of the Party should have been heard in the form of mass agitation showing *our* way out of the crisis. Such work by the Party, as a Party, carried on week by week in the factory, in the midst of the economic struggle, together with the more elementary mass work of the union, will draw and attract



the more aggressive, alert elements of the workers into the Party and help the union to raise the struggle to a higher level, which the union alone, without this Party work, can not do.

A party that cannot penetrate into the basic factories and organize the union there is not a Bolshevik Party. It is a mere philosophizing sect that shirks (as opportunists do) the hard work of bucking up against monopoly capital. A party incapable of making even the first essential steps to the decisive sections of the working class. Many are the "left" apologies made not to do this work. One of them is that the union cannot be organized in the plant until we have a Party there, "double secret"; and the way to get the Party is to get out a Party factory paper first. The result of this sectarian opportunist conception and approach conceived in isolation from the masses is that both the Party paper and the Party groups turn out to be very much of a miscarriage. Experience bears out the fact that it is the union which is the mass bridge to the Party politically and *organizationally*, and that the building of the union is the best mass approach to the building of the Party, and the method of uniting the masses for the struggle to defend their immediate interests and raise and secure their political development.

#### PROCEDURE IS IMPORTANT

One more question on the problem of trade union organization. Too often comrades handle a trade union like a Party unit, with all the informalities of the Party unit meeting. Everybody speaks without any specified order. There is no such thing as a Chairman or Rules of Order, or any organizational details which the average worker considers very important. In trade union work we have to proceed with methods which workers, by tradition, are most ready to accept. Unless we do that, they do not recognize it as a union. The constant propaganda of the bourgeoisie and the A. F. of L. that these are not trade unions, but the Communist Party in disguise, affects the workers deeply. Unless we pay attention to these details, workers who are not familiar with our organizational methods will be repelled. Such matters as formal procedure, taking minutes, electing a chairman, making and seconding of motions, rendering financial reports, and maintaining formal system and order in the organization, are important. When the meeting is announced for eight o'clock, it should not be held at half-past eight or nine. Union meetings must start on time. Besides promptness, there must be such things as charters, a regular dues system, etc., or the workers will not look upon the union as a union.

We must also pay attention to headquarters in order to attract

workers who are not politically developed. If we establish headquarters or union offices in the hall of some of the non-Party organizations, it is politically important that these headquarters be fixed up so that the average worker will feel at home and will not think that the organization he is joining is only a pretense. These things go against the grain of some of our comrades, and they went against the grain with me some years ago, too. I, too, was impatient with all these things; but in order to penetrate the masses we have to consider them as they are, work with them as they are, giving them constantly our Communist guidance and leadership. Therefore, all the organizational details must be based on this recognition.

#### THE OPEN LETTER—THE ROAD TO A REAL MASS PARTY

On the basis of the Open Letter, we can now really build the Party. We are going to have units that will not be dependent on circular letter leadership. The unit which has to solve practical problems in the shop and neighborhood upon which it is concentrating can not get much help from a circular letter. The circular letter is good only when it is sent for internal organizational information, but the moment we have units that tackle the problems of the American Steel & Wire, Sheet & Tube, Firestone, etc., circular letters are worse than useless as a substitute for guidance.

In order that the Party may really lead, it has to know what the next steps must be. This means personal leadership. It means *discussing the problems with the Party members, and adopting methods that these Party comrades think they can carry through at the proper time*. This means that much of the total character of our work will change; and to make a change of this kind is really a tremendous thing in our Party. Those comrades who belittle this Letter, saying that we have had other resolutions, letters, etc., are either politically illiterate or have not read the Letter. The Open Letter points clearly to the tremendous tasks and the tremendous changes we have before us. On the basis of this Letter, we are moving towards organizing the kind of party we have always been striving for but have not achieved.

The type of cadres will also be different. Whom do we have now as a unit leader? The type of person who can do organizational inside work. But if we carry out the Open Letter, we shall bring forward those comrades in the unit and section who will be able to give leadership on the concrete every-day problems that our Party members and the workers face in the factories, and those

who will distinguish themselves by their ability to keep that leadership. Many of those who are now not that type, will probably themselves change as a result of this.

Concerning fractions: Our fractions in the mass organizations will have as their job, not only problems of a cultural nature, not only the keeping of the records straight on sick and death benefits as in the I.W.O., but also the job of recruiting new members from the factories, concentrating on some factory, educating the workers for struggle for the improvement of their conditions.

As a result of the total process of applying the line embodied in the Open Letter, on the basis of which every unit is to judge its problems and political development, every section is to take up the question of what factories to concentrate its forces on, where every unit is to start, how it is to proceed from step to step; we shall be moving forward to the type of mass Party the workers want, to the type of Party which will connect with the decisive sections of the working class and raise the struggle to a higher level. On this basis we will develop a new internal life with real political mass work among the masses for the building of a mass Bolshevik Party.

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