

How Not to Apply the Open Letter

By GERTRUDE HAESSLER

(*A reply to the article by J. A. Zack in the February issue of THE COMMUNIST, entitled "How to Apply the Open Letter".*)

"It is only natural that a Social-Democrat who conceives the political struggle as being identical with the 'economic struggle against the employers and the government', should conceive 'organization of revolutionists' as being more or less identical with 'organization of workers', and this, in fact, is what actually happens; so that when we talk about organization, we literally talk in different tongues. I recall a conversation I once had with a fairly consistent Economist, with whom I had not been previously acquainted. We were discussing the brochure *Who Will Make The Political Revolution?* and we were very soon agreed that the principal defect in that brochure was that it ignored the question of organization. We were beginning to think that we were in complete agreement with each other—but as the conversation proceeded, it became clear that we were talking of different things. My interlocutor accused the author of the brochure just mentioned of ignoring strike funds, mutual-aid societies, etc.; whereas, I had in mind an organization of revolutionists, as an essential factor in 'making' the political revolution.

"After that became clear, I hardly remember a single question of importance upon which I was in agreement with that Economist!

"What was the source of our disagreement? It is the fact that on questions of organization and politics the Economists are forever lapsing from Social Democracy into trade unionism. . . ."

(*Lenin, Iskra Period, Vol. II, p. 187.*)

For over six pages out of a ten-page article in the February *Communist*, Comrade Zack speaks of applying the Open Letter in the shops. As one of those "Party members who have been most active for the last few years in trade union work", he welcomes the Open Letter, "since it is possible now, much more than ever before, to throw the entire strength of our movement behind the realization of our main line—to organize in the basic industries". For over six pages Comrade Zack speaks a language which leads one to believe that he has whole-heartedly understood and accepted the

Open Letter's main line—to penetrate the factory proletariat with the Party.

Then, like Lenin and the Economist, the Open Letter and Zack find they have been speaking a different language! The Open Letter has in mind the Party—but Comrade Zack, for over six pages, has been speaking as a “union organizer and of methods of organizing average workers”! And from that time on, there is hardly a single question of importance upon which the Open Letter is in agreement with Comrade Zack! Lenin, back in 1902, had come to grips with “trade union politics”. Now the Open Letter in 1934, in America, has the self-same task all over again.

Comrade Zack interprets the main line of the Open Letter in his own peculiar way. He quotes from it as follows:

“... 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.”*

Comrade Zack speaks for pages of “realizing our main line”, of “organizing of the workers in the factories”, of “tackling a factory”, of “penetrating the factory proletariat”. But he tells us he is speaking as a Union organizer! Does the Open Letter have to tell us to base ourselves on the factories to organize the Union? That is absurd! Surely we are not going to begin building trade unions *outside the factories!* The Open Letter, in speaking of “penetrating”, of “gaining a base”, of “winning influence”, “to establish firm contacts”, etc.,—with the decisive sections of the proletariat, in the basic industries, etc.—is speaking of *the Party*.

No member of the Party may underestimate the great importance of building the Unions in the shops—the Unions, which the Open Letter calls the “highways to the broadest masses of workers”. But Comrade Zack cannot see the forest for the trees. Build the Unions first, and then build the Party, says Zack with his mechanistic “stages theory”.

Zack polemizes against those leading functionaries of the Party who, in his opinion, “somehow hold to the theory that the Party must be built first in the factory, then the Union”. Of course, Comrade Zack simply fastens these theories onto these functionaries.

* I could not find the quotation from the *Open Letter* upon which Comrade Zack bases his entire argument, anywhere in my copy of the *Open Letter* (the penny pamphlet issued by the Central Committee). I went over it many times but could not find it. But since the text is in line with the *Open Letter*, I will accept it. My quarrel is not with the text, but with its interpretation.

The whole conception of placing one first and the other second, be it Party or Union, is wrong. We build the Union as we build the Party. We build the Party as we build the Union. Is anyone foolish enough to believe, as Comrade Zack thinks they believe, that first we must politicalize the workers by agitation and propaganda on political issues, and then bring them to a realization of the need for union organization? And vice versa, could anyone, especially after having read Comrade Lenin's *What Is to Be Done*, believe that the stages theory works the other way, that first we organize workers into economic organizations, and then build the Party as a sort of superstructure? And yet, with all of Comrade Zack's phrases about building the Party also in the factory, this is exactly what he believes must be done.

Lenin also met with this viewpoint back in 1902. He sharply repudiates the "political superstructure" views of the Self-Emancipation of the Workers' Group. In speaking of their manifesto he says:

"Similarly these authors do not 'repudiate' politics, they merely say (merely!), repeating what was said by V. V., that politics are the superstructure, and therefore, 'political agitation must be the superstructure to the agitation carried on in favor of the economic struggle; it must arise on the basis of this struggle and give precedence to it.'"

(Lenin, *Iskra Period*, Vol. II, p. 127.)

"Examine this view", continues Comrade Lenin, "from the standpoint of the opinion prevailing among all Economists, that political agitation must *follow* economic agitation. Is it true that, in general, the economic struggle 'is the most widely applicable method' of drawing the masses into the political struggle? It is absolutely untrue. All and sundry manifestations of police tyranny and autocratic outrage, in addition to the evils connected with the economic struggle, are equally 'widely applicable' as a means of drawing in the masses. Why, then, should we beforehand *restrict* the scope of political agitation by declaring *only one* of the methods to be 'the most widely applicable', when Social Democrats have other, generally speaking, not less 'widely applicable' means?"

(Lenin, *Iskra Period*, Vol. II, p. 140.)

Here is the crux of Comrade Zack's attitude; a quotation from his own article:

"A Party that cannot penetrate into the basic factories and organize the Union there, is not a Bolshevik Party. It is a merely 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 that 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."

Here is the whole conception of playing Party and Union against each other. Here is the whole conception that, because Party papers have been badly handled in the past, and as a result have had some pretty bad consequences for Party and Union in the shop, that Party papers are basically harmful. Here is not the Bolshevik conception that the Party papers, which are basically necessary in the shop, should adopt the proper methods. Here is a crude conception that since the Party papers did harm to the work, abolish them, and start with the more logical task, of building one step first—the Union—and then when we have the workers firmly under our control in the Unions, we can perhaps take a chance of inoculating a few of the picked ones with the germ of Communism. He says:

"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. . . ."

Does this disprove our "main line"—which, in the light of the Open Letter, is to form a base *for the Party* in the shops? It does not. It simply proves that our methods of work so far have, unfortunately, been wrong, and have betrayed great inexperience. But we will improve these methods—not abandon them.

Comrade Browder, in his report to the Eighteenth Plenum of our Central Committee, speaking of *Party* shop papers, said:

"How are we to build the stronghold of the Party in the shops if in the first place we ignore and neglect shop papers? . . . To the degree to which we recover our line on this weak sector of the front, and begin to really establish a battery of papers worthy of the name, we can begin to perform this tremendous task we have set ourselves of establishing the Party stronghold in the shops."

Comrade Zack does not "ignore and neglect" the Party shop papers. He simply and brutally murders them. He even proposed

in the District Secretariat in Cleveland that no Party shop papers be issued in District 6. Can you imagine one of our concentration Districts without a Party shop paper? And yet that is the state of affairs in the Cleveland District. Of course, the leadership in the District is taking strenuous measures to root out any such conception, and is now vigorously pushing the work of reviving and improving Party shop papers, and founding new ones.

Notice, Comrade Zack, that Comrade Browder very carefully robs you of your ammunition in his formulation. He says: "begin to really establish a battery of shop papers *worthy of the name*". That is our task—to make our shop papers worthy of the name. Our task is not to kill them off.

In the reviews of shop papers appearing fairly regularly of late in the *Daily Worker*, it has been attempted to make of them shop papers "worthy of the name". The object was not merely to criticize, but, by analyzing them, to help in improving them. The two extremes of Party papers have been dealt with. *The Ground Hog*, issued in the Illinois Coal Fields, was criticized for having too much the character of a left union opposition paper. *The Dock Worker*, issued on the Duluth docks, suffered in its October issue from the same defect. On the other hand, *The Yard Voice* is issued by the Party unit in the Brooklyn Navy Yards. It consists of a series of political articles, with not one single word from beginning to end, on shop organization and building up the union. Here are the extremes that give Comrade Zack his ammunition for sniping at the Party shop papers. It is wrong, Comrade Zack, to attempt to kill off these papers. What you must do is to help teach these comrades how to utilize these papers to help build up union organization—the highway for the Party to the masses—and how to mobilize these strategic workers—miners, dock workers, and armaments producers for the proletarian revolution. Can there be such a thing as "step by step"? Can there be such a thing as depriving these important Party units in these basic industries and plants of their most important means of bringing before these strategic workers our Party campaigns and slogans, our entire program? How can we bring before them the burning political slogans of the day—the conquest of power, the setting up of a Soviet America?

A further word on shop papers in this connection. While we should always welcome the appearance of Union shop papers in shops, and should endeavor by all means to utilize them, by articles signed by Communists, to bring forward the Party policies and tactics, experience has shown that they are insufficient for bringing forward the Party and its program and cannot replace the Party papers. *The Yard Worker*, for instance, the Party paper in the

Brooklyn Navy Yards, was created because the Party comrades in the shop found it impossible to bring the Party program to the workers through the Union shop paper already existing.

Comrade Zack is not building the highway to the masses with his Unions. He is building a wall between the Party and the masses with his Unions. There is sectarianism and sectarianism, Comrade Zack, and that sectarianism which springs from the right danger, opportunism, is the more dangerous and must be fought the more sharply.

Comrade Zack thinks he is being very highly political when he says:

"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."

But if this statement is taken in the light of Comrade Zack's general trade-union primacy approach, his argument resolves itself as follows: The economic struggle is becoming interwoven with the political struggle. The intervention by the Government in the day-to-day life of the masses is introducing more and more the political elements of the struggle. The fight against the Government measures on the economic issues leads to a fight against the Government. Hence, we have but to bring the workers into trade union organizations, to develop the economic struggles, and our political work will naturally flow therefrom.

This thesis may seem to be identical with the thesis of the Party which lays the emphasis on the economic struggles as the road which we must take to win the majority of the working class. But in reality this is not identical with the Party's viewpoint. The fact that the Government is fixing wages, that the Government has become a factor in the every-day life of the masses, *creates the conditions* for raising the class-consciousness, the political level, of the workers, but does not automatically, spontaneously, do this. It is necessary for the Party to show to the workers that the Government is their enemy; to expose the N.R.A. program; to expose the class-collaboration policy of the Government; to unmask the demagoguery of the Government and of the social-fascists; to propose an alternative program to the workers; to hammer home, on the basis of the ex-

periences of the workers themselves, the correctness of our viewpoint; etc., etc. By that means *the favorable conditions* already created will be *utilized by the Party* to achieve the political elevation of the working class.

In the last period serious deviations have occurred in the struggle against the N.R.A.—hesitation in exposing the N.R.A. in the economic struggles as an instrument of the greater exploitation of the workers, and in many cases hesitation to fight against Roosevelt. And why was this so? Because the conception of spontaneity, of the automatic transformation of the economic struggle into the political struggle, permeates many of our comrades, and in such cases, weakens not only the political struggles but also the economic struggle.

I do not discuss here in detail the necessity for connecting up the economic struggle with the revolutionary way out, which can be done only by the persistent work of the Party. This latter point is of particular importance in view of the "political animation" of the masses at the present time, about which Lenin wrote:

"We must bear in mind that in one year of political animation, the proletariat can obtain more revolutionary training than in several years of political calm. That is why the tendency of the above-mentioned Socialist consciously or unconsciously to *restrict* the scope and content of political agitation is particularly harmful."

(Lenin, *Iskra Period*, Vol. II, p. 85.)

Comrade Zack relies too much upon the spontaneous development of the economic struggle into the political struggle, but a long time ago Comrade Lenin disposed of this question when he dealt with the wave of strikes in Russia in the 'nineties:

"Taken by themselves, these strikes were simple trade union struggles, but not yet Social-Democratic struggles. They testified to the awakening antagonisms between workers and employers, but the workers were not and could not be conscious of the irreconcilable antagonism of their interests to the whole of the modern political and social system, *i. e.*, it was not yet Social-Democratic consciousness. In this sense, the strikes of the nineties, in spite of the enormous progress they represented as compared with the 'revolts', represented a purely spontaneous movement.

"We said that *there could not yet be* Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. This consciousness could only be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own efforts, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness, *i. e.*, it may itself realize the necessity of combining in unions, to fight against the employers and to strive to compel the government to pass necessary labor legislation, etc. . . . Trade unionism does not exclude 'politics' altogether as some imagine. Trade unions have always conducted

political agitation and struggle (not but Social-Democratic ones)."
(Lenin, *Iskra Period*, Vol. II, p. 114.)

Comrade Zack has not observed another peculiarity of the situation in the United States. The workers are becoming revolutionary. They are engaged in unprecedented struggle. They are streaming into the trade unions. Though we have in this upsurge participated in struggles, led 200,000 through the revolutionary unions in strike struggles, established contact with A. F. of L. workers and influenced the course of their struggles, nevertheless, the majority of the workers seeking organization entered into the A. F. of L. unions, and the A. F. of L. and Socialists were able to secure the lead of some of the major battles.

And why was this so? Aside from the policies of the Government, of helping the A. F. of L. bureaucrats, it was due to the failure of the Party to realize that its main task is to throw its full energies into the organization of the workers, into the leadership of their economic struggles, *which is impossible without convincing the workers that class organization and victorious struggle are possible only through the leadership of the Party and the revolutionary unions*; to fight for the unity of the workers against the offensive the reformist leadership. The narrow "trade union" approach of Comrade Zack restricts this very political (agitational, organizational) fight against the reformists and mars the success of our struggle with the A. F. of L. leaders and Socialists.

Can these tasks be achieved if the face of the Party and the revolutionary unions is hidden, as happened in many cases? Can this be done by running away from the "Red Scare"? Can it be done by continuing the sectarian division, which so often manifests itself, between political and trade union work, and which Comrade Zack's conception deepens? It is not at all accidental that Comrade Zack does not give the proper answer on how to meet the "Red Scare", when he says in his article:

"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, that we stand for unity . . .", etc., etc.

This position is clear, but inadequate. The first method is not "meeting the Red Scare", but it is running away from it. The second method is too narrow.

What is the "Red scare"? It is the attempt of the capitalists

to bring their agitational and police machinery into force, to scare off the workers from revolutionary organization and struggle on the grounds:

(a) That the Communists are not interested in the economic struggle of the workers and are trying to capitalize the economic struggle for their "narrow" political ends;

(b) To create the impression that the social reformists are interested in the immediate concerns of the workers and that the bosses have no objections to dealing with such officials who do not want to overthrow the system; in connection with these two points, to make use of the prejudices instilled by the bourgeoisie into the workers against the Communists; and

(c) To use terror against the workers and to create the idea that this terror is due only to the participation of the Communists.

The aim of the "Red Scare" is to split the ranks of the workers, to prevent their unity, which is growing in the camp of the working class. It is clear that the defeat of the "Red Scare" requires that the Communists daily, *before the struggle and during the struggle*:

(a) Convince the workers that they are fighting for their immediate demands;

(b) That the Communists are the most active in the struggles and are inseparable from the workers and are their most trusted leaders;

(c) That they are the best fighters for unity of the workers' ranks, and that the labor bureaucrats are splitting the ranks;

(d) That the bourgeoisie, particularly in the present period, will not make concessions on economic demands unless forced by the mass power of the workers, and that the labor bureaucrats do not fight for the immediate demands; to show to the workers that the bourgeoisie is partial to the labor bureaucrats and against the Communists, because they count upon these bureaucrats not to fight for the demands of the workers, but to betray them;

(e) To show to the workers what the Communists and the revolutionary trade unions are, what they really stand for, smashing the ideas that they are "outsiders", "a small group of trouble-makers", etc., etc., and showing particularly their stand toward the unity of the workers;

(f) Showing to the workers the relation between the crisis and their economic struggles and how the workers can get out of the crisis.

These tasks, dexterously applied, are the way to fight and defeat the "Red Scare", to defeat the attempt to isolate the Party. But this group of tasks shown why we cannot cut down the weapons we

must use—as Zack proposes; it shows why we cannot and should not counterpoise Party work and trade union work.

What does the building of the Party in the shops mean? It means to build the Party nuclei, to make them active. It means for the nuclei to take up the economic day-to-day grievances; to establish contact with the other workers in the shop; to organize them into shop committees, trade unions, into other mass organizations; to achieve ideological and organizational leadership in the shops; to become the leaders of the trade unions we form; to overcome the illusions of the workers in the shops; to combat the influence of the social-reformists; to isolate the social-reformists; to establish the solidarity of Negroes and whites by combatting chauvinism; to fight for the unity of employed and unemployed; to fight against imperialist war; to break down the illusions of the workers with respect to American democracy; to combat the attempts of the fascists to build up influence among the workers in the shops; to spread Communist ideas among the workers; to convince them that between the maximum program of the Communist Party and the day-to-day class struggle of the workers there is no gulf, but a definite interlinking; to make them realize that it is necessary to unite their ranks for the overthrow of the system.

Only this conception of rooting the Party in the shops can build trade union organization; can maintain and develop that which we organize; strengthen the workers, so as to make them able to defeat the bosses' war designs and the attempt to develop the fascist dictatorship; can meet the requirements of the present moment, the demands imposed upon the Party in the close approach of "a new round of revolutions and wars".

In connection with all these tasks it is clear that the Party must recruit members, new readers for the *Daily Worker* and the rest of the Party press, etc.

This conception of building the Party in the shop eliminates any dualism between the task of our political work and trade union work.

At the base of Comrade Zack's argument is an underestimation of the depth of the crisis and the readiness of the masses for revolutionary struggles. Comrade Zack therefore fears that Party work in the shop will hamper, rather than help, Union organization. This is an opportunist fear which Comrade Zack is courageous enough to express, but there are other Party members who have this same right tendency, but who suppress it for fear of being labelled deviators. It is better to come out with it, as Comrade Zack does, so that it can be thrashed out. Comrade Zack simply and honestly misunderstands the Open letter.

We've got to put the Thirteenth Plenum Resolution into effect. We've got to throw ourselves whole-heartedly into accepting the Open Letter in its true meaning. We've got to throw ourselves whole-heartedly into the task of winning over the strategic sections of the working class for our final aim—the setting up of the proletarian dictatorship in America. Comrade Zack's tendency to place trade union work against political work objectively makes of the Party an impotent sect. Likewise, for this very reason, such a conception limits revolutionary trade union work. That is essentially the sectarianism which opportunism creates, and which holds us back from winning the majority of the working class for the proletarian revolution.
