

Some Problems in Our Trade Union Work

By JACK STACHEL

THE Eighth Party Convention stressed for the whole Party, in line with the recent decisions of the Communist International, the fact that the economic struggles are today the link through which we can develop the revolutionary struggle of the American working class. In this respect the Convention instructed the Central Committee to make a check-up and to report within three months after the Convention on our success in drawing in every Party member eligible for trade unions into a trade union. This task will be undertaken through articles in the press and through meetings. In that connection we shall also stress the building of the fractions and their role. As for the relation of Party and trade union work, we know that even as late as 1934 we still have tendencies in our Party to put the Party in one pocket and the trade union in another pocket, and some of our comrades have a pocket for only one and not for the other.

We must understand that our Party is changing, rapidly changing. Some of us may have discussed this question three years ago and may feel it is finished; but the Party does not know all about it, and the working masses around the Party do not know all about it. That phase of our enlightenment on this question must be brought, not only among the Party members, but even to the masses in the trade unions, from whom we have nothing to hide. On the contrary, we are in duty bound to explain the role of our Party in the struggle and to expose all fear of the "Red scare", brought in by the enemy under the guise of neutrality.

How can we solve this question and where do we meet it most? Well, let us start with the factory. We have had comrades who even formulated this wrong policy in a document at one time. About two years ago, in the New York District, a comrade who was at that time the organizer of the Trade Union Unity League, Comrade Zack, wrote a document in which he developed the theory that in the relation of Party and union work, we must go according to stages. He had four stages. You go into a factory—the first stage—to make contact with the workers. When you get finished with that, you chalk that off and you go to the second stage: you try to develop some small struggles. Then you come to the third

stage: you lead a mass struggle. After that is over successfully, you go to the fourth stage: you consolidate yourself and then you are ready to go and talk Party, but not before. Why such a theory? Because, the answer will be given, the American working class is backward. If you come at once with the Party they will be afraid, so do not frighten them, fool them. First rope them in, and when you get them, then take them. The only trouble with that policy—if it could be worked, and it can't be worked—would be the following. At the meeting once when Zack's document was read, someone got up and said, "Yes, Comrade Zack, but unless we have the Party in the first, second and third stages, we lose the struggle and we cannot build anything." What has been our experience in the last few years, in the past year of big struggles?

We have led many struggles and strikes in some places. We were defeated precisely because we were not able to rally the workers solidly enough politically on issues of class struggle, against class collaboration, against reformism, against arbitration, to defeat the A. F. of L. bureaucrats and all the attacks of the company; because we did not have—inside the shop—a corps of comrades with a program and a policy and unity among themselves in carrying out this program, who could by their example unite all the workers in the shop. We were even able to consolidate a mass organization of thousands when everything was nice and peaceful, but when the big attack of the bosses came (Ambridge is a case in point), we were crushed. Why? Because we had nothing on which to hang. We had no Party, no steel rod to hold up the whole situation. This emphasizes, first, that without work in the factories we cannot build trade unions and without bringing forward and building the Party in the factories, we cannot build a lasting organization to withstand the full attack of the enemy, the capitalists, the A. F. of L. bureaucrats, the socialists, and the government. If we approach this question properly, many other questions will be solved; the relation of the fraction to the Party units will be solved, because if you build a nucleus in a factory and you build your union in the factory as a local, you have at the same time your fraction there which guides the work.

What is the present situation in regard to our trade union policy? We can observe in the past, as already emphasized in our Convention documents: (1) Growth of militant strikes; (2) Growth of the trade unions.

In regard to the trade unions, we have, first, the growth of the A. F. of L. unions in some industries for the first time, as in

the automobile industry; in others for the first time in more than 12 or 15 years, as in steel. In general there has been a substantial growth of the A. F. of L. It is true that the A. F. of L. Executive Council, which is now meeting, will announce that their total gains since last year are 450,000, which will express only the per capita in Mr. Green's office, because they have the same problem that we have; they have members who do not pay dues. There are many industries, such as steel and automobile, where the workers are not willing just to pay dues because they see no struggle. They joined the A. F. of L. expecting struggles. Where they have per capita is where they have shop control, as in dress and coal.

Secondly, a new factor in the development of this country has been a relatively important growth of independent unions in the last few months—in mining (a split from the old U.M.W.A.), in the auto industry, among the tool and die workers, among the shoe workers, in textiles, and the like.

Thirdly, there has been an increase in the membership of the T.U.U.L. Side by side with this we can record the growth of the opposition movement in the A. F. of L. and the growth of a whole series of difficulties for the A. F. of L. bureaucracy on such questions as the N.R.A., craft or industrial unionism, high initiation fees, and the like.

In the light of this situation what should be our trade union policy? Some comrades would say that nothing has happened and nothing should bother us; we should just go along as we did. Comrade Zack, for example, was the only one in the whole Convention who voted against the trade union resolution of the Party. This shows how united the Party is, but also shows how wrong Zack is. Comrade Zack wrote an article in the April issue of *The Communist*, stating that independent unions grew, that T.U.U.L. unions grew, that oppositions grew, but he does not see that the A. F. of L. has grown. He says: "The greatest event in my opinion . . . of the last year is the growth of independent trade union organization outside of the A. F. of L., comprising about three hundred thousand workers". Then he says that the second important thing in this country, "Another event of enormous significance and equal importance is the militancy displayed by the masses organized into the A. F. of L."

Well and good, but in no place does he see the significance of the fact that for the first time since the post-war period there is a growth of the A. F. of L. unions; he does not see the policy of the bourgeoisie which is promoting them side by side with the company unions. Such an analysis must lead to a wrong policy. Is there need for more important work in the A. F. of L., according to his

analysis? Of course not. On the contrary, he thinks we should run quickly out of the A. F. of L. The Party Resolution, however, states that any underestimation of work in the A. F. of L. cannot be tolerated.

On the other hand, there are some gentlemen who believe that the growth of the A. F. of L. settles everything, that the only thing left to do is to take the independent unions, to take the T.U.U.L. unions, and force them into the A. F. of L. Mr. Lovestone has just written an article in the May issue of the *Modern Monthly*. You do not have to buy it to read, because it says nothing that was not said in 1929; it is based exactly on an article written by John Pepper in 1928-29. That means that Lovestone is evidently not learning very much, although he is learning how to make new company as the May Day march shows, evidently company where he belongs and feels quite at home. Well, we reject this policy with equal force. Of course, the Trotzkyites have a different policy. Mr. Cannon, the Trotzkyite leader in the United States, has just written an article in the *Militant* attacking Lovestone for his wrong policy in the furrier situation. What did Lovestone propose in this situation? That the Joint Council of the A. F. of L. become the real union. Cannon says, "You are wrong". But what does he think should be done? He admits that the T.U.U.L. is the only fighting union and, he says, the T.U.U.L. union should apply to the A. F. of L. to join and unite with the other leaders!

What is our position? We can see that the A. F. of L. has become tremendously more important than ever before. We might say that even two years ago we underestimated the work, which was wrong, but today to underestimate it is suicide. For, hundreds of thousands have joined the A. F. of L., and done so in the basic industries—mining, steel, textile, automobile, longshore, garment, oil. Secondly, the influence that these workers have in the factories, even where they are not yet a majority, also has an important effect upon the rest of the workers. The A. F. of L. may have 800 members out of 2,000 in an automobile plant, but it does not mean that the 800 during a struggle do not affect the other 1,200. Therefore, it would be foolish to judge only by numbers, although we should take them into account. The Party emphasizes, therefore, that our basic task is to win these millions in the A. F. of L. Without that we cannot talk seriously about winning the majority of the American working class to our Party program of struggle.

Secondly, we must shift our main work in the A. F. of L., more and more, along the whole line of the Party concentration program in the basic industries. Without neglecting the building trades and needle trades, more attention must be paid to mining,

steel, automobile, longshore, oil, and the like. In certain industries our main task is work in the A. F. of L.: as in mining, where 80 per cent of the workers are organized; in building, where they are the only mass unions, and where there are no revolutionary unions of any consequence outside of some small unions in New York; in railroads, where the reformist unions are dominant, and in the largest sections of the more privileged workers in the printing trades. In these sections they have become increasingly important and you cannot talk about any struggle in the factories or any building of T.U.U.L. unions without serious work in the A. F. of L., such as the textile, steel, automobile and needle industries. We also recognize the new factor, the growth of the independent unions, which number between 200,000 and 250,000 throughout the country, particularly in the shoe, mining, food, automobile, textile and metal industries, including such important industries as shipbuilding, airplane and taxi; and among many white-collar organizations, like postal workers.

There also we must work and win these workers for our program of struggle. Does this mean that we are giving up building the T.U.U.L. unions? On the contrary, we utilize every possibility in this increased radicalization of the masses to build the T.U.U.L. unions. In certain industries, the T.U.U.L. unions are dominant, as among the seamen, among the agricultural workers, among the lumbermen and fishermen. Here they are the only unions carrying on struggle. In some light and heavy industries they have established themselves, as in the needle, furniture, food, steel and metal industries. Some of our other unions have not grown and are extremely weak. In mining, the main task has become work in the U.M.W.A. In the textile industry, where the independent and A. F. of L. unions have grown tremendously; and in the automobile industry, where our union is numerically not strong but has influence, but where lately tens of thousands have been organized into the A. F. of L. and other thousands in the tool and die makers' organization, we must, while making the most serious efforts to build the T.U.U.L. unions, give maximum attention to work in these A. F. of L. and independent unions.

In each case we must weigh what should be our tactics, where we must throw the main weight: in the A. F. of L., or in building the T.U.U.L. or independent unions. But in each case our aim is the same—to make contact with the masses, to lead in struggle, gain influence, consolidate this influence among the masses, on the basis of work in the factories in the first place—and to crystallize a revolutionary trade union movement among these workers, which

may consist of T.U.U.L. unions, of oppositions in the A. F. of L. unions or independent unions, or of independent class trade unions.

However, this whole question raises another question which the Party is trying to answer now; and that is the following: Can we look forward to a situation where there may develop simultaneously, as we have already, an A. F. of L. center, a T.U.U.L., and a new center of the independent unions, which already number more than the T.U.U.L. unions? Or if we do not like that, can we take these workers in the independent unions and ask them to join the T.U.U.L.? Yes, we can, but the trouble is they would not do this so easily. And they would not join the A. F. of L. because these workers who enter independent unions in the main, are workers who are already more radicalized than the workers in the A. F. of L., workers who either split from the A. F. of L. because they disagreed with the policy of the bureaucrats or who refused to join because they did not agree with the policies and tactics, the dues system, etc. At the same time, in the main, they are workers who are a little afraid of even the T.U.U.L. In some cases it is due to bad work of our unions, but not always. And we cannot just make up a prescription that they must join the T.U.U.L. We can try to win them. That is the question—how to win them? If we leave these workers alone, what way will they go?

Many of these unions, isolated, will be destroyed because they will not be able to resist the attacks of the enemies—the A. F. of L., the government, the S.P. and others. Corrupt elements will gain headway and destroy them from within, and most likely even affiliate them with the A. F. of L. There is another prospect. That the “Left” reformist elements—not only Muste but others of that type—will try to bring these workers into a new center, fooling these workers by saying: “We will help you, with neither Green nor Foster to come in between”.

Basing ourselves on the idea, which is correct, that these masses in the independent unions—even though dominated by reformists—are more Left than the A. F. of L. and are willing to unite for struggle, it is our duty to win these workers over and to fuse them with the workers in the T.U.U.L. unions, who are even more advanced. And what will be the result? Here is something which we must remember. When you mix the revolutionary workers with these workers what will happen? Will the workers in the T.U.U.L. become less revolutionary? No. The other workers will become more revolutionary, because they will learn by experience and contact with our workers. In other words, there is nothing to fear from the revolutionary workers; but we can hope that these now backward workers, who are willing to fight, will come in closer contact

with our members and leadership and will become more revolutionary. Our policy must be one that will lead to the formation in the United States of an independent federation of labor, uniting all these workers outside of the A. F. of L. How shall we achieve that? Some may think, by calling a T.U.U.L. Convention, where, by changing our name and our constitution, we shall get them all to flock in. We may paint the house different, but it won't work like that. Others may think that all we have to do is to send a call to all the unions, to all the leaders, and form an organization. That is impossible. With Mr. Matthew Smith who exposes Left-Wing elements, and Mr. Pearcy of the P.M.A. we will not unite. What have we in mind where we speak of a labor federation? We have in mind that it would be not a new T.U.U.L. with a different name. We have in mind that it would be an elementary class struggle union federation, but at the same time not a new A. F. of L. The workers have one A. F. of L., and that is too much. Therefore, such a center can be built only through struggle, through winning the workers in these independent unions to a more conscious class policy and isolating these leaders who are reformists in these unions.

We propose certain concrete measures. For example, we propose wherever possible (we have in mind New York, Philadelphia, Connecticut, upstate New York, Jamestown) to bring together, at least in loose formation, most of the independent unions jointly with the T.U.U.L. unions on the basis of struggle around certain questions, issues, and demands about which they all feel in common—the attack of the A. F. of L., the attack of the employers, company unions, and the like—and gradually lead them into one organization. We have in mind, if we succeed in New York, for example, the possibility of unifying the T.U.U.L. organization with the independent unions, such as the Amalgamated Food Workers, the taxi workers, shoe workers, independent building trades unions, into an independent union council, together with various white-collar organizations and many small organizations that may exist, which may bring in some 80,000 to 100,000 workers. Such a federation will not only yield results in uniting young groups into independent T.U.U.L. unions, it will stimulate activity among the unorganized who do not know where to turn and will see in this an expression of what they wanted, an incentive to go into action and organization. If we can form such a center in New York we also have a possibility in Camden, Connecticut, Jamestown and other centers where we control or have influence in a number of independent unions. Let me also mention that the socialists, especially the so-called "Lefts", have taken hold of a number of independent unions, as for example, in Camden, N. J., and Gardner, Mass. In

these unions which they go into or even organize, their aim to to block our leadership and carry through their reformist policy.

What we have in mind is that one or two of the important independent unions, together with the "New York Central Labor Union" which we can build, and a number of outstanding T.U.U.L. unions, would come together and issue a call for such a convention to form one federation, but that would not be the convention of the federation. It would go in resolution form to every independent union and local of the T.U.U.L. It would lay the basis for the real fight—against the Zimmermans and the other such controlling elements in the shoe unions—through a referendum of the membership for such a federation. We would demand a special convention of the Progressive Miners, where we would carry through such a policy. Such a struggle is also possible in Detroit. In other words, it would be a fight, a struggle. It would take months, maybe longer. But no matter what the outcome, the masses would learn. The masses would move forward and we would march at the head of them

This raises another question concerning the A. F. of L. Comrade Zack also raises this question, and other people have raised this question. Well, if we build such a federation, would we not want more company, would we not tell all of our friends in the American Federation of Labor, "Why don't you come in and join us"? No, we would not do that. We'll say, "Live in the house of the enemy and put him out of the house". At least win the workers if you can't win the building. We do not want anyone to assume, neither our friends nor our enemies, that through the idea of building such a federation of labor, we aim to split the A. F. of L. unions or draw out the most militant workers from the A. F. of L., leaving the rest of the workers under the thumb of the bureaucrats. That would be an even more serious mistake of the type that we have made in the last years; we have made such mistakes, let us admit it. We have in many cases taken the Left-Wingers out, with many bad results. We have learned from it. The first mistake can be excused; but we should not repeat it.

Our conception, therefore, is that such a federation of labor would not solve the whole problem. The central task among the organized workers is to work among the millions in the A. F. of L. We have no conception that such a federation would at once gather millions—at best it would rally hundreds of thousands. It would be a force proportionately much greater, but the problems of the millions remain, the millions in the basic industries. *There* must be our main work, where these masses are, among the millions; *there* must be the problem of building the oppositions. Our per-

spective, therefore, is not to draw the militants in the A. F. of L. out into the new federation, but rather the development in this country at one and the same time of a strong opposition movement in the A. F. of L. and a relatively strong independent federation of labor on a class struggle basis.

In the long run, will that lead in most industries to one union? Yes, that would be the tendency, because our main slogan is that we stand for unity, for one class-struggle union in every industry. This will be possible by isolating the reformist leaders in the unions, by isolating them in the struggle. Therefore, in the fight side by side with the new federation, it will be possible to unite all the workers, even those in the A. F. of L. in one union. Such can exist in New York in the knitgoods industry, where we may form one independent union of the three locals in the knitgoods industry. It is also possible in certain other sections of the country in various industries.

I have spoken against splitting off small groups in the A. F. of L. But does this mean that we do not foresee that a large section of A. F. of L. workers will join such an independent center? This will come especially from the so-called Federal Unions, of which there are very many today, and which the A. F. of L. is trying to crush rather than build because they challenge the A. F. of L. with their militancy and their industrial form of organization.

Among the workers in these locals three things take place: (1) They can defeat, disintegrate and abandon their organization and send their charters back, as happened in the automobile industry in New Jersey, in Chester, Pa., in the airplane factories and in the Sikorsky plant. (2) We have a strong militant opposition, conducting militant struggle, such as in Kenosha, in the automobile industry, and among the cleaners and dyers in Philadelphia. (3) There is another possibility, such as in Hartford, in the airplane plants, where the workers wanted to liquidate their organizations, but because of our timely participation, we were able to help them build an independent union of 2,500 members, which is now taking steps to unite the airplane industry everywhere.

Therefore, we see the possibility that these workers, betrayed, will come in and that we will work with them. The test in each case will be: Will such a policy hinder or help in the development of the revolutionization of the workers? If we are confronted with a big national union, like the miners' or cloakmakers' union, and we split off a few groups, leaving the main mass, we weaken the struggle and help the bureaucrats. In the long run, we cannot keep these small groups. We keep the closest sympathizers and Communists; but we would have kept them no matter where they

were, even in fascist unions. On the other hand, in the case of Federal local unions or larger groups of workers who want to split, to cut themselves from the bureaucrats—if that would mean developing the struggle, if a failure to bring them into the new center would mean to shatter them, then we would decide to bring them in. The policy, in each case, must lead to a broader development of the workers.

In our A. F. of L. work, which we must stress even more today, we must also bear in mind this: First, we cannot come to the workers with a negative policy, as some of our comrades try to do: "We will watch and let the others do the building." We must come in there sincerely to build the union, to fight the employers and the reformists who are their agents, to lead the workers and show them we are fighting for them and leading them. We want the union to be built for the workers and against the bureaucrats. On the other hand, while we want to participate in elections, utilizing every office, let us not become too legal-minded, as we tend to be in the A. F. of L. "We cannot do this or that"; "We are only in one local"; with the consequence that the workers fail to see the difference between our leadership and that of the bureaucrats. We are honest, our books are straight, but the workers' income is not increased. Why don't we fight for them? Some may answer, "Because we are finishers and not cutters". Why not build the shop group in each place and in each shop build the struggle? Developing the struggle and leading the workers in the shop is the main question: the fight for the unemployed, for the Negro masses in the reformist unions, shop organization, rank-and-file control, rank-and-file committees in strikes which we will have to set up over the heads of the bureaucrats—this we will have to do even though we do not control the offices.

Comrade Piatnitsky speaking only recently on the question, asked why we are so much worried that they may control the top offices. Supposing Dubinsky controls the top office, or Hillman? If we control the local organization and lead them in struggles so that these leaders are actually afraid to come to the masses and speak to them, let them control the offices with the aid of the government. We will have the masses in the decisive moment, we will lead the masses in the struggle, and not they—and against them. But this requires that we win the masses by fighting for them, by showing them how our methods are the only methods that lead to success.

In conclusion, a few words about the Party and the revolutionary way out of the crisis. Our enemies often say, wanting to pass compliments, that we are very honest people, we fight for the revolution—they give us credit for that. "But you have no desire

to help the workers in their struggle for better conditions because you Communists think that if the workers improve their conditions, they would not want a revolution; therefore," they say, "the socialists would not be so good on the revolution, but they are good for advances today; the Communists will be strong for revolution, but not for improving the conditions today". In Haverhill that was the main cry of the employers. Politically, that is the cry of the employers. Our best answer is how we fight in the struggle. Without such an answer every other answer will fail. But we can explain to the workers theoretically, how it is that economic struggles become political struggles; that capitalism today is not in the stage at which it was years ago; that every economic struggle today, every victory for the workers weakens capitalism.

The socialists and the A. F. of L. leaders, starting with the idea of helping capitalism, cannot, of course, fight successfully for the workers' immediate needs. On the other hand, we Communists, who have no interest whatsoever in trying to save capitalism, do not mind a bit, if as a result of our being able to win the struggles of the workers, capitalism becomes weaker. That only proves that we are correct, that capitalism is no longer progressive, that it is reactionary. Even from this theoretical viewpoint it is clear that there is no division between the economic struggle today and the fight for power. The Comintern emphasizes that precisely today under the crisis, in order to develop the revolutionary struggle of the masses for power, it is necessary to lead the masses of workers in the struggle for their immediate economic interests. However, this does not mean that, left by themselves, the workers will automatically learn that they have to abolish capitalism, and how to do it. Our program must convince them of that. This requires proof, as we have stated in our Manifesto, of what we will offer the masses, in contrast to the lies and propaganda of the fascists and New Dealers. This requires gaining the confidence of the masses through struggle; it requires building the trade unions and other class organizations, and, above all, a mass Party in a big country like the United States, a mass Party of hundreds of thousands of workers of the factories and trade unions, to guide the workers, to win their confidence, lead them in the decisive battles against war, against fascism, for the defense of the Soviet Union and for power. This requires that our Party members, especially our comrades in the trade unions, endeavor to become Bolsheviks. Lenin pointed that out years ago in *What Is To Be Done*, which every Communist should read if he really wants to know the experience that the Bolsheviks had in that Party. Lenin declared:

"The Social-Democrat's* ideal should not be a trade union secretary, but *a tribune of the people*, able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it takes place, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; he must be able to group all these manifestations into a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; he must be able to take advantage of every petty event in order to explain his Socialist convictions and his Social-Democratic demands *to all*, in order to explain to *all* and every one the world historical significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat."

From this some comrades conclude that to do Party work is work of the first class, while doing trade union organization work is work of an inferior character, which makes them Party members of the second class.

Lenin did not mean that at all. Lenin simply meant that we should not become pitiful pure-and-simple trade unionists, but Bolsheviks in the trade unions, the main organizations of the masses; we should lead their work, become real Communists, develop our qualities as Bolsheviks in the factories, with the masses.

* At the time Lenin wrote *What Is to Be Done* (1902) the Party's name was Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party; the term "Social-Democratic" therefore as used by Lenin should not be confused with its meaning at the present time.