

**PROGRESSIVE
LABOR**

OPPORTUNISM IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT

by Lucy St. John

Today hardly a day goes by that the crisis of the capitalist system is not exposed. This crisis is reflected not only in the growing militancy of the workers, the ferment in the campuses and in the ghettos but also in the ruling class itself. Each event brings into question the very existence of capitalism.

At the same time the ruling class is forced more and more to seek aid from those who talk left, who pose as "revolutionaries" in order to hide its crisis and contain the struggle within the bounds of their system. These organizations then serve a specific purpose. They talk of Marxism-Leninism, of revolution and the working class but all this talk serves as a cover for their policies of containing the struggles of workers, students, black militants and keeping them from coming to revolutionary politics by diverting them in this left talk and in separate isolated struggles, syndicalist, student, community struggles keeping these limited to anti-political forms of action refusing to raise the political issues that tie all these struggles together. They vulgarize Marxism by reducing it to the level of impressionism.

Today more than ever it is necessary to examine those "revolutionaries" who pose as leaders of the working class but actually tie the working class to the capitalist system. It is necessary to understand their method. This is the purpose of this series of articles on Progressive Labor.

talk

Progressive Labor from its very origins as a split from the Communist Party has proclaimed itself a Marxist-Leninist Party and sought to intervene in the struggles of the working class. Its literature is filled with talk of revolution and socialism. But we must go beyond this statement of orthodoxy to understand the real nature of PL and see how they relate this in practice. PL's method and role is clearly revealed in practice in its work in the trade union movement.

PL has given uncritical support to the Rank and File Committee now in the SSEU. This caucus originally began in 1966. It was formed by militants who saw that the Mage leadership did not have a program to beat back the increasing attacks by the City, and that an alternative program was necessary. This understanding was combined with at least the expressed agreement by the founding members of the need to go beyond simple trade unionism to fight in the union for a political alternative to the capitalist parties. Early in its development there was agreement on the need to fight Economism by bringing working class politics into the union.

Participating in this caucus were a number of forces, some supported uncritically by PL and some supported by the Workers League. A struggle began almost immediately by those militants supported by the WL to make the caucus a combative organization to fight for leadership against the Mage bureaucracy raising the need for political struggle within this context. Those forces supported by PL waged a fight against such a conception of a caucus, fighting against even the development of a program on the basis that a program was not necessary, it would come in time. Instead these forces wanted a study group discussing radical politics, confining politics to the living room rather than as a necessary part of the struggle in the union.

victory

In the next period the Rank and File Committee fought in the union for a program of victory around the contract negotiations over the objections of those forces who continually fought to limit the caucus to a discussion group.

The SSEU was defeated in January despite the growing opposition to the Mage leadership in part led by the Rank and File Committee. This defeat was a result of the increasing attack on the city unions by the government reflected in the push for stronger anti-strike legislation in the form of revisions of the Taylor Law and OCB. SSEU's defeat raised clearly its isolation from the rest of the labor movement and the stepped-up attacks raised the need for a political struggle against Lindsay's policies.

economism

At a time when the political questions were being raised by the objective conditions, those for-

ces supported by PL fought to keep these issues out of the union. Political propaganda seemed to be all right as long as it remained in the living room and did not lead to a real confrontation against the leadership and the City. These forces began adapting to the most backward elements within the caucus seeking to limit the struggles in the union to "organization", "democracy" and "bread and butter issues." This tailing even got these forces into situations of fighting against a position of U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, of saying "political issues could not be raised by college graduates because they are real workers. You cannot raise political issues--they will alienate the workers--you have to reach the workers where they are at--at their present level." When those in the caucus supported by the WL fought to raise in the program of the upcoming election the need for a political struggle by the working class, the need to pose an alternative to the Democratic and Republican parties, they were expelled through a bureaucratic maneuver. This method of quelling disputes is not new to PL with its origins in Stalinism.

At the time of this expulsion we stated that the Rank and File Committee would seek more and more to limit the struggles against the Mage leadership and would collaborate with the bureaucracy in keeping the workers powerless, keeping the struggles at the present level. We stated that the bankruptcy of their program would be revealed in time.

revealed

Their role was clearly revealed during the SSEU strike last summer. The SSEU was forced out after six months of negotiations with the City with nothing gained. Prior to this struggle those forces in the SSEU supported by the WL had begun a fight in the union in the light of the defeat of the SSEU and the exposure of its powerlessness in isolation from the rest of the labor movement to affiliate the SSEU with District Council 37 seeing that only within this context could the SSEU conduct a struggle against the City.

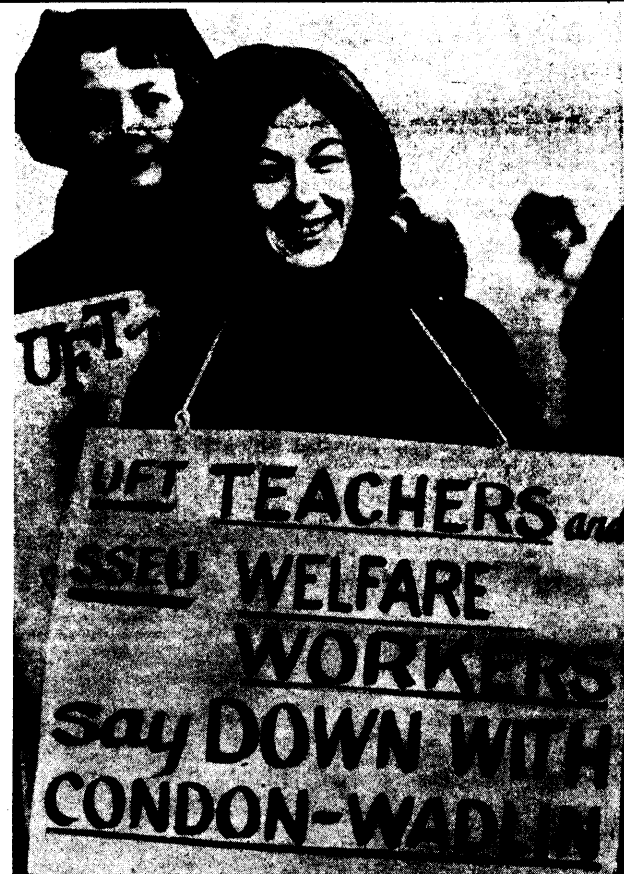
The SSEU's isolation was revealed clearly in the strike. A solid picket line for seven weeks could not win the workers anything. On the initiative of the forces supported by the WL a demand was raised that the SSEU campaign in the ranks of the city labor movement for support. This fight was taken up by the leadership and handed over to a leading member of the Rank and File Committee who kept this fight within the limits of the bureaucracy refusing to launch an all out campaign among the ranks of city labor.

After five weeks at a point when the defeat of the SSEU was clear and that the program of the Mage leadership could not win the strike, members of the Rank and File Committee turned from working for the Mage bureaucracy to panic. Gasping they assured the workers that "we can win." But the Rank and File Committee had no program for victory different from what the Mage leadership had used for the last five weeks with no victory in sight and the destruction of the union being posed each day. The Rank and File Committee's solution was just more of Mage's policies. "Our job is to hold out and escalate. We must continue to prepare ourselves financially and in every way for staying out as long as it is necessary. We must attempt to further cripple the operation of the Department by being harder on the scabs and by beginning to develop greater support among clerks and supervisors. Victory can be ours. We must fight for it."

This was the Rank and File Committee's solution. Just a little more militancy. No program for victory other than loss of more money and possibly terrorism against the scabs. The lesson to be learned from this strike was clearly not that more militancy was needed but rather that the SSEU is powerless outside the rest of the labor movement and that city unions will suffer defeat after defeat until they begin a campaign against the political attack on city workers by the government.

tail

But the Rank and File Committee did not learn its lessons, just as PL which supports their line can neither learn nor pose an alternative for the working class except to tail behind the workers and call for more militancy. Today the Rank and File Committee is almost indistinguishable from the Mage leadership. Approaching a new election in the SSEU at a time when many forces, even sections of the bureaucracy have taken up the fight for affiliation of the SSEU with DC 37, the Rank and File Committee again conducted one of its annual purges, expelling over 10 members of varying



PLP HAS NO ANSWERS FOR WELFARE WORKERS

political views from its ranks. They expelled all those who posed an alternative program limited as these programs were to the current leadership including many of those who seek to affiliate the SSEU with DC 37.

The bankruptcy of this caucus is clear. Today they are unable to mount a campaign against the Mage leadership despite their "broad base". They have no alternative program. They now find themselves forced to support affiliation, having decided to support it after seeing growing support in the ranks. This committee finds itself at the very tail of every struggle.

The policies of the Rank and File Committee represent PL's policies in practice. The orthodoxy in their press becomes blatant opportunism in practice, adapting to the most backward elements, unable to pose any alternative program to the bureaucracy, taking up a struggle only after seeing that the ranks are moving in that direction. PL's politics in the unions represent very clearly economism and tailism which they so avidly attack, posing as followers of Lenin. PL finds itself caught between sectarianism and opportunism. On the one hand seeking to keep working class politics pure in a discussion club and on the other hand limiting the struggles in the working class to simple trade union issues to "where the workers are at," refusing to give any leadership.

PL seeks to reduce the struggles of the class to narrow trade unionism, to project only that "which is possible for the workers to wage under the present conditions" and that "which they are actually waging at the present time." They relegate revolutionary politics to the armchair and subordinate them to strictly trade union issues, subordinating the struggle for an alternative to the capitalist parties to a struggle within the capitalist system, to strengthening what actually exists within the working class. This is why they refuse to fight for leadership and seek only to tail behind the workers. They find themselves cringing before the spontaneity of the workers, prostrate before their militancy. Their revolutionary politics essentially becomes irrelevant and they find that their only task inside the actual struggles of the class is to join the reformist struggle and fight for the best picket lines. Such organizations which pose as leaders of the working class who contain the struggle within the bounds of syndicalism leave the workers in the hands of the bureaucracy and the capitalist parties.

betrayal

PL's support of the policies of the Rank and File Committee are only one example of their betrayal of Marxism. Today they have even gone so far as to develop a "theory" to justify these policies--the "theory" of the "left-center coalition," much as Stalin developed his theory of "socialism in one country" to justify his betrayal of the Russian revolution. But PL has its origins in just this tradition. In the next issue we will take up in greater detail the extension of these policies in the trade union movement and examine the method which is at the basis of them.

**QUESTIONS FACING PROGRESSIVE LABOR
ON THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF REVISIONISM**

BULLETIN PUBLICATIONS
243 E. 10 ST. RM. 8 NEW YORK 10003

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