On the labor front

Are Unions Weapons of Revolution?

Recent columns in this section have dealt with the necessity for communists to be active in trade union work on both the technical and reformist, basis. What precisely does this mean in everyday struggles? Are "unions" weapons of "revolution" as a recent D-C headline stated? If so, in what sense? If not, why not? A letter in this issue suggests that both the analysis and the editorial on the Texas farmworker struggle for placing too much stress on the selfishness of the settler and on formulating a better union program, with not enough attention to the factors that the Party's program for building revolution through that struggle.

Recently C-D ran an editorial (Jan. 30) which included the following: "... we enter these (union and contract) struggles in a fighting mood, battling not only for higher wages, better conditions and a more democratic union but primarily to try to get employers to see that we are fighting for free for everything. Why are we forced to strike against the bosses? Because they are on our backs. All of these "why" stems from the nature of the capitalist mode of production in a society in which a small group of bosses own and control everything (including the government) and the overwhelming majority are workers who produce everything and barely keep our heads above water.

--So a communist franchise in a union election becomes: to elect candidates who work with workers in our shop the real demands we have and why we have our backs to the wall; [2] running candidates around specific demands PLUS the need to dump the system; [3] if not running candidates, exposing the fakers who are running.

Communists... should organize campaigns, strikes for 30 hours work for 30 hours pay, against the rich's racist police who destroy workers' liberty and reaps super-profits for the bosses, against the oppression of women in the family and against the whole system to solve these problems to the real solution: Socialism and workers' power.

--By entering these contract and union struggles full blast and exposing how capitalism lies us in knots, we can build a revolutionary party and a revolutionary movement that has the power to overthrow capitalism.

Two situations in which P-L members are trying to give this kind of leadership have been reported recently in C-D: one among Texas farmworkers and another in the Colgate plant in Menasha, Wisc. In Texas, a number of newly recruited P-L Party members have led a fight which has ousted the settler Chalubin et al. from the local farm workers organization. In the D-Texas Farmworkers Union (TFW) and has led the workers to choose Section Party members to be on the union's executive board. A struggle is going on between these Party-led forces and the old leadership of this union in the C-D, farm workers joined P-L, the circulation of C-D (and therefore the spread of communist ideas) rose sharply, and great momentum has been given in the organization of a May Day march in the Rio Grande Valley, led by the Party around its ideas.

Would the Party's ideology and membership have been built if we had abstained from ourselves from this class struggle? Probably not. Has our participation in this single action automatically led to the building of revolutionary ideas and of P-LP? Definitely not. These ideas were brought from outside the immediate reform struggle, and, in the case of May Day occurred alongside it.

A' the same time, these communist ideas helped to raise the level of the struggle and turn it more into a class struggle, against the growers (and their labor lieutenants) as part of a CLASS: not as a group of naive individuals who are mean to workers.

In the Colgate plant, as C-D reported, the Party reacted to the bosses' hearing that the workers in the plant were in an "acting" position of stealing "stealing" equipment and demanding the right to keep the surplus of surplus proceeds (on the job) by pointing out that the real stealing in this plant involves capitalists stealing from workers. Bosses never pay workers wages equal to the value our labor power creates, the source of bosses' profits (surplus value). This was coupled with the demand to refuse lunchbox "inspection."

The next level of struggle occurred at a union meeting in which a Party member linked the contract struggle to U.S. imperialism's exploitation of workers in South Africa. When the union leader warned that the workers that too great a settlement could be expected (if the plant is part of tiny part of the international conglomerate that owns Colgate) and is therefore expendable, the PLP pointed out: [1] if the bosses, as a class, have an international strategy, so too should the working class have an international strategy; [2] that part of this strategy should be for helping workers fighting for freedom in South Africa, where Colgate has a plant and uses racism to reap super-profits and pit these workers against the bosses in the U.S.; and

That's not what a shop steward is supposed to do; stick to your job of filing grievances. But if we have run for election on a platform of not merely militating against the bosses, but of opposing the capitalist system, then we would point out that this is precisely what we are doing and that we are fighting for another system--Socialism--which can wipe out the SOURCÉ of such grievances.

If this ups the ante of class struggle, fine! If it leads to our ouster as shop stewarde--or in Texas, ouster from the executive board--the barometer of workers in losing will not become worse, we maintained the union position, but what we were using this position on behalf of the best class interests of the workers we elected us; that is, whether we treated workers to revolutionary ideas and impelled them to some to join PLP.

"Who are we in this manner of what does this mean union involvement in Revolution?" Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that communist leadership which raises political demands of the working class raises the CLASS struggle; no, because we are still in the hands of the Party until they all don't join the Party--closer to the stakes of the seizure of state power. But it is correct by the same token, that P-LP is not just another set of communist ideas, not simply militant trade unionists using revolutionary ideas, but a social revolution that sense that cannot become revolutionary organizations doing the job of the working class--not as a party (as it is put forward by anarcho-syndicalists). Their goals are reform within capitalism (see previous two columns); if a union, and ALL its members, adopted the goal of revolution, of the seizure of state power from the bosses as a class, and subordinated its central character--reforim--it would cease to be a trade union under capitalism but become part of a revolutionary party.

The new P-LP pamphlet, MARCH ON MAY DAY, is one of the best pieces of communist literature I've read in over 30 years of being active in the communist movement. It's exceptionally well written, clear, logical, persuasive, not cliches, and above all presents a personal understanding of the capitalist system and the revolutionary road to overthrow it. It's an excellent document.

I strongly urge every C-D reader to send in $1 NOW (plus any extra they can afford) to the tens of thousands more of this pamphlet can be published. Also, if every C-D reader would order 10-20 copies to give to friends, family, and co-workers we would reach more than a quarter of a million workers. This would help to raise the communist consciousness of a significant number of our audience.

The mass circulation of MARCH ON MAY DAY is a great organization for building for large May Day demonstrations. It can also become an excellent piece of basic Marxist-Leninist literature for study by communists. Comrades! Friend! Send in your dollars. Order a bunch. Do it NOW! Enclose it to $10 towards my own order of 25 copies. 

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