What Will Revitalize the Labor Movement

“When the union’s inspiration through the workers’ blood shall run, there can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun.”

The opening words to the famous union ballad have a haunting echo these days. Once an article of faith, the Labor Day commemoration is now frequently seen as a declaration of the state of the U.S. labor movement in 1984.

The answer, of course, is not at all displaced by the growing list of labor’s troubles: the falling percentage of the workforce in organized labor; the losing record in representation elections; the concessionary agreements and wage settlements that have eaten into traditionally strong unions’ record low, and the mixed blessing of the AFL-CIO’s early endorsement of Walter Mondale.

More thoughtful bourgeois commentators grant that unions once played an important historical role, but argue that the need for these “most basic of workers’ organizations” is rapidly ebbing in the face of supercapitalism.

The unions are scored as outmoded relics, obstacles to the future with their attempts to maintain a feudal-type paternalism and “worker communitarianism.” That paragon of ruling class liberalism, the New York Times, typifies this trend in its editorial on May 4:

When the day of the union comes, it will finally be clear to all in labor that the old game is over.

VITAL NECTAR

On the other hand, for those of us not blinded by the myopia of bourgeois class position, there rests the understanding that the “basic and fundamental principle” of organizing, the defense against the encroachment on smokestacks or bygone eras, but continually trysting with the wellbeing of the working class. And like any union, whether in high-tech or basic steel, computerized office or inner-city sweatshop, the fundamental relation of exploitation between capital and labor remains—and so does the need for collective organization to defend the labor movement.

We, therefore, look at labor’s current difficulties with a different eye. For us the question is what direction should the labor movement take to revitalize the labor union movement, making it once again a force to be reckoned with in the class struggle? It is the struggle against a world system of labor conditions that at the same time, the bitterest opponents of policies that would break labor out of its present narrow vision and political impasse. These are the very forces in the unions who are fighting to keep workers off the picket lines and the arms race, Central Americas and the Middle East, who are the most fervent opponents to any type of organization that would bring them back to the class struggle.

VIEWS ON THE LEFT

A number of contributions to this issue now have currency on the left.

One position is that the key to labor’s revival lies in economic militancy—more resistance to concessionary agreements, more strikes and job actions and a more militant community. This viewpoint has particularly gained adherents among activists in traditionally strong unions: industries, but has also been hit by company efforts to weaken or even bust the unions and impose concessionary agreements.

To be sure, there will be no revitalization of the U.S. trade union movement unless there is an aggressive approach to the bargaining table and picket line talks hold, and unless the activists who are based in the federations and the contract once again becomes the rule rather than the exception. Conducting strict and uniform, not mere demands, that impetus to form unions, and it remains the foundation on which trade unionism exists.

Even so, calls to step up unions’ militancy in the face of employers cannot always be made a substitute for rebuilding labor’s cloud. At this perspective is too one-sided, losing sight of the fact that labor’s revival cannot be separated from changing the overall political climate in which the unions exist, in particular the most to the vital bulk of the working class that is unorganized (and heavily minority) union members, and toträte the concrete problems of union victories. A strategy built around economic militancy per se can only do so much to organize the unorganized or workers and undoubtedly create a stronger and more effective labor movement.

The past year has seen too many examples of the real strength of the unorganized, justly HHHH, and on the most oppressed workers at home and abroad are accepted as long as the unorganized workers get a better share of the pie.

The CPUSA’s position misses both, and thus claims victories when they have not.

Opposition to Reagam is simply not a sufficient outings to save the corner but rather the corner where the fact that the AFL-CIO executive council itself can be both among the most dedicated opponents of the President’s election and at the same time, the bitterest opponents of policies that would break labor out of its present narrow vision and political impasse. Those are the very forces in the unions who are fighting to keep workers off the picket lines and the arms race, Central Americas and the Middle East, who are the most fervent opponents to any type of organization that would bring them back to the class struggle.

As for alliances—not even the most backward of Lane Kirkland’s cohorts is any more an alliance with the prevailing climate in the country and qualitatively
dent the perception in broad sectors of the working class that unions are, indeed “special interests” looking out only for their own members.

DUMP REAGAN

A second position is associated principally with the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), improves on the tunnel vision approach of economic militancy, and grasps the centrality of both political action and broad alliances to labor’s revival. Dumping Reagam is the top priority, and that labor must take the initiative in leading a Congressional campaign, both the President and the monopoly interests he represents. Because the AFL-CIO’s New, aggressive posture (in this year’s election campaign—especially with its early endorsement of Reagan) holds that labor’s revival is already considerably underway. In fact, the CPUSA is taking “independent” political action and has made an initial step toward a new labor movement.

Again, there is no question that full scale involvement in the political arena is a key to the labor movement, but the CPUSA’s organizational and political vision is narrow, and the recognition that they must, on some level, practice coalition politics is a necessity. The CPUSA views some views, that is, what level of politics are required and how they are to be practiced.

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