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DRAFT TRADE UNION MEMORANDUM

The 1971 plenum of the SL voted that the penetration of a section of our cadre and a good part of our membership into the trade unions had a priority second only to the stabilization and maintenance of a regular, monthly press. This primarily meant getting an increased proportion of our growing membership into the unions in a period of recession and chronic unemployment. A trade union directorship and subsequently a trade union commission of the political bureau were set up to accomplish this goal, as well as guide the work of existing fractions.

The political Memorandum adopted by the Central Committee plenum estimated that historically only 15% of SL members have been active in trade union work (i.e., publishing written propaganda in their unions as a minimum definition of "active"). As a result of membership growth and despite recent gains of reinforcement of existing fractions and the creation of a potential (not yet active) fraction in a new arena, the present figure is under 10%! Only the qualitative raising (to 30 to 40%) of this percentage and the building of nation-wide fractions in selected major unions will demonstrate capacity in our goal of rooting our cadre in the working class. Failure to accomplish this would mean failure to lay the groundwork for overcoming the historic divorce of the American working-class left from its base and thus, under present conditions, failure in our perspective of building the nucleus of the working-class vanguard party in this country.

To accomplish this, a general rule in both the SL and the RCY will be necessary: that basic livelihood decisions (viz. school or work, and if work, what and where) of all comrades are subject to review by the trade union commission and/or director and/or local organizer responsible for trade union work. Most younger members of both organizations--exceptions determined individually--and selected older comrades will be required to place themselves at the disposal of the union penetration work, in order to ensure that the necessary fraction eventually get in.

Most important in this effort is the need to find and snatch up immediately the infrequent opportunities for hiring into union situations. The preliminary acquisition of necessary skills and good job experience records will be important, and skills and upgrading will be important after hiring as well, particularly in areas in which the arduousness of the work severely limits the ability of the comrade(s) involved to function politically.

While the trade union work of our combined movement is conducted solely by the SL, this does not mean that members of the RCY will not be involved. We hope that many RCYers, willingly throwing themselves into the SL's trade union effort, while perhaps not ready for SL membership, will find themselves in real or potential fraction

situations. While SL membership is not an immediate necessity in such a situation, depending on the case, nevertheless the comrade's RCY work will become more or less rapidly curtailed, his trade union work will be solely under SL direction and the question of his SL membership will become more important.

At this stage, our trade union work necessarily retains its exemplary character, and requires concentration of our forces in arenas in which their propaganda value and national impact will be maximized. Thus we are aiming at the following set list of national unions, in order of priority, and seek to avoid dead-end local situations:

1) Maritime: Our oldest and most experienced fraction, both in terms of organizational operation in a major union and application of our line, exists in a maritime union. The union is heavily affected by the general crisis of the maritime trades, in which previously advanced trade union positions (exemplified by the hiring hall particularly) have been eroded in the past 3 to 5 years at a devastating rate, through a combination of consciously-applied capitalist anti-labor automation techniques and obscene bureaucratic malfeasance. This has virtually destroyed the position of the second-class (non-member) members, causing a drastic reduction in the over-all work force and making our concerted efforts at reinforcement over the past period very difficult indeed.

Based in the post-war period on a violent anti-communism, the bureaucratic leadership finds a certain support amongst the remaining core of full union members for its intensely patriotic/chauvinist response to the specific job-cutting and "run-away" practices of the employers. This membership generally lacks turn-over, youth, and is often personally defeatist. The chief political task of our fraction's caucus--taken up more consciously recently--is to strike hard at the bureaucratic chauvinism, emphasizing an internationalist line and standing in a state of tension with the bulk of the membership, while vigorously defending the jobs of the workers. Besides application of the "sliding scale of wages and hours" demand, this directly involves raising the slogan of "expropriation under workers' control."

In addition, a special emphasis on the fights of the second-class members is required. They are younger and often more militant. The bureaucracy's "answer" to the job crisis is to continue discrimination against them and force them (along with large numbers of full members) to seek work elsewhere, which they have been doing, in large numbers. Our fraction initiated a special committee for the rights of these workers and fights for their full rights in the union.

While recruitment to the caucus and the SL has been present it has not been easy, and may remain difficult in the future, as the union shows every sign of shortly being destroyed by the bureaucratic response to capitalist strangulation. Nevertheless, our fraction has succeeded in establishing the only serious opposition to the bureaucracy and stands sharply counterposed to the latter as the alternative to the death of the union. Furthermore, the fraction sets an example of the kind of work needed elsewhere, and is preparing experienced cadre for that work.

Although the situation is loosening up somewhat, the long history and central role of anti-communism in the union continues to necessitate a policy of tight security for those involved in it. While of course not hiding their politics, they must with special care follow the general practice of not operating openly as members of the SL.

2) Communications: Our second existing fraction is in a large, national communications union with a rising curve of rank-and-file militancy colliding with a skillfull national bureaucracy of the most reactionary stripe, well versed in its methods of collusion with both company and government. Our fraction has some direct history and even more indirect experience behind it, and its caucus formation is recruiting other oppositionists in the union, yet it still rests on a very thin line of cadre.

Because of the greater strength of our maritime fraction, its limited potential and the previous efforts of reinforcement (in process of consolidation), the communications union is actually our first priority in terms of penetrating the unions. Attempts at reinforcing the West Coast base with implantation in New York and Boston are proceeding apace, as yet without tangible success, but with a good possibility for the future. This, however, may require further sacrifices in terms of finding cadre to send in and/or aiding in their training for the job.

The West Coast caucus has for some time contained left-leaning members of an opportunist opponent organization. This situation poses sharply the nature of the caucus, which is an organizationally-unrelated carrier of the vanguard party's political program for its arena, and calls for sharp political struggle. Ultimately, such a situation is tenable only if the ORO involved really agrees with the essence of the SL's program for the trade unions, which is not the case here.

3) Heavy Assembly: Owing to the efficiency and diligence of our Boston branch leadership in seizing available opportunities, we have recently succeeded in getting several comrades into a nationwide, heavy assembly-line industrial union which is a vital key to the American working class as a whole. The industry is characterized by a high turn-over of unskilled young workers, many coming up from the South or just entering the working class, and including a high proportion of Blacks and other minorities: the exact opposite of stultified trades and contracting, job-trusted industries such as maritime.

The situation varies widely around the country. A somewhat more open, fluid situation on the West Coast is matched by a potentially powerful but racially polarized Mid-west center and a more conservative mood on the East Coast, reflecting, in Boston, the influence of the Catholic Church. The grueling character of the industry and the resultant powerful bursts of militancy are, however, a nationwide phenomenon of central importance in the American class struggle.

Our penetration of this arena retains a certain experimental character, since experience has shown that for a group of our size,

the cost in terms of literal destruction of cadre from the arduous work involved in this industry is often too great to maintain the work. However, its long-term importance is not to be denied, and reinforcement of the potential (not yet active) fraction, around New York and on the West Coast, is at present a very important second priority in terms of penetration.

In order to maximize national impact, we are seeking to reinforce this fraction in the one company we have already been hired by. This company has recently begun to hire women, which gives us an added opportunity for getting hired.

4) Municipal/Governmental Employees: Because of the rapid expansion and militancy of the municipal, white collar and governmental sections of the working class, we have staked out a large, growing, national union of this sector as a fourth priority for trade union work, which, in terms of penetration, should be treated in general as a place to send those comrades who, for one reason or another, are unable to get into one of the other unions.

While we have few active members in this union at present, our history in a relatively radical municipal white collar union in New York City which recently re-affiliated with this union gives us a background of caucus experience in the arena.

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It should be noted that where we have members in the above unions they are 1) isolated in one locality and 2) too few in numbers. Our vital penetration task, in order to qualitatively transform our fledgling trade union work into significant exemplary struggle, is to reinforce these fractions with fractions in other areas, giving us a nationwide base in each union. This will more than double the effectiveness of each fraction both within the union and as a vital arm of SL work.

Trade Union Commission
12 April 1972