

Tasks for the '80s ★ August 28-30, Detroit, Michigan

Strategies Towards A Labor Party I.S. Political Committee

[This paper is offered for discussion at the conference plenary on Strategies Towards a Labor Party.]

... a Senate Democratic panel before which testified Lane Kirkland, president of the AFL-CIO, and Doug Fraser, president of the United Auto Workers. In the past, the entire Democratic leadership and a crowd of supporters would have turned out to hear America's top labor leaders. Instead only five senators... and a small audience showed up.

... (after a while) the audience had dwindled to less than 30 people. Moreover, there was a palpable air of defeat in the hearing room. Although a few TV cameras recorded the proceedings, all the speakers were quite subdued, as if they were afraid to call too much attention in public to their new powerlessness.

—Jeffrey Klein, *Mother Jones*, June, 1981

FOR THE LAST 30 YEARS, the strategy of the labor bureaucracy has been a partnership between the union bureaucracy and the capitalists based on a trade-off: increased wages for control over the production process.

The exchange seemed good for most everyone involved. The organized working class got an increased standard of living. The capitalists gained control over production. And the labor bureaucrats got some security and protection from the rank and file. There were still conflicts to be resolved, but these could be handled within a framework of common goals.

This policy of class collaboration at the workplace was paralleled in politics. "Pressure group" politics within the Democratic Party was the mechanism.

The partnership could only work in the context of a period of continued prosperity. With the end of easy prosperity, the deal has been breaking down. The employers cannot afford it so easily. And why should they? The whole purpose was to gain control over the workplace. The employers have new ways to keep the workforce docile (like threats of plant closings), and the union bureaucracy's adherence to old work rules and procedures is itself an obstacle to greater employer control. The result has been the "employers' offensive" against the working class and the trade unions.

The weakness of the labor movement has facilitated the employers' offensive. Even in its area of greatest strength—contract bargaining—the labor movement is taking a beating. While the decline of labor's power has been a 10-year trend, the unions have gone through the "zero" point, shifting from a pretense of aggressive bargaining to a decisively defensive stand.

For example, two years ago the UAW was in contract negotiations. There was no talk of concessions. While the UAW warned it was in a weak position because of a soft economy, discussion around the contract was whether enough had been won. Today the contract discussion is on which things will be conceded. The only talk of winning has to do with seats on boards of directors, phoney profit-sharing schemes, etc.

In the Teamsters, the struggle is to save the Master Freight Agreement. In steel, the union is actually trying to save the ENA ("no-strike pledge").

The relationship between the unions and the government has also gone through a marked change. Four years ago, the unions denounced wage-price freezes. Today, major unions accept wage freezes (and even rollbacks) without a pretense of price or profit control. In the case of the Chrysler bailout, the government dictated the conditions, which became the pattern for other bargaining. In Detroit more recently the state legislature required the city to negotiate concessions from the city workers.

Not only is labor winning nothing new, but the old victories (including unemployment compensation and social security) are in jeopardy.

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For the bulk of the trade union bureaucracy, the response to labor's decreasing power has been knee-jerk—even more class collaboration.

Politically, the AFL-CIO leadership is trying to tighten its ties to the national Democratic Party machine. They are pushing labor endorsements in the primaries and supporting party rule changes to allow the national Democratic Party to intervene in local candidate selection. The task is to weed out the reformers, the leftists, the feminists, the gays, and the "amateurs" who are responsible for the weakness of the Democratic Party.

In direct dealings with individual capitalists the labor bureaucracy is trying to find new offerings to maintain class collaboration. Union bureaucrats are now exclaiming about "imaginative innovations" and taking great pride in programs that every decent trade unionist would have denounced 10 years ago. No-strike agreements, union officers on company boards, productivity drives, absentee controls. These are all embraced under names like "employee involvement" and "quality of work life."

The union bureaucracy is so desperate to hold on to its position and prestige that it is willing to give up almost anything else. But what is even more dangerous is that these views are also embraced by the rank and file. Productivity drives are accepted not simply because they are sugar-coated with "quality of work life" rhetoric, but because they are actually seen as a way — perhaps the only way — to hold onto jobs.

Most workers realize that simple industrial militancy as a total program will not work. The threat that companies will respond to militancy with plant closings is credible, especially in individual cases. The rank and file, offered industrial militancy without a full program by the left or the bureaucracy's strategy of collaboration, is increasingly cynical. The rank and file has a sense of powerlessness and the corresponding attitude that the future is tied to cooperation with the industry/company.

Recently, the labor leadership, in particular its social-unionist wing, has raised the idea of political action as a substitute for militant struggle. The campaigns for a "veto proof" Congress in 1974, Carter in 1976, and Kennedy in 1980 were offered to the membership as solutions to problems (like unemployment) which vitally affected workers, but could not be addressed through collective bargaining.

In the past period, we did argue that labor's strength both at the bargaining table and in the political arena lay in the mobilization of the rank and file and not with reliance on liberal politicians. But in our every-day work we emphasized the economic struggle against the employers. We took this approach for two reasons. First, for us and those we worked with the idea that significant gains could be made through collective bargaining was credible, and significant advances in ongoing rank and file organization were, in fact, made through basic contract struggles. Second our assessment was that there was no real audience for the labor party idea and that therefore the labor party was not "actionable."

This led to a kind of ideological inversion, with the labor bureaucrats arguing for a broad political strategy (which in some versions contained ideas like full employment through national planning and the need for an alliance between labor and the other oppressed groups in society) and the left demanding a return to militant collective bargaining.

We can no longer view political action as either an evasion by the labor leadership or as something for the rank and file movement "down the road." We can no longer claim with credibility that industrial militancy alone can meet the challenge of the employers, even in the short run.

An adjustment in theory and practice is needed. The left in the unions must develop a program of political action to complement the program of industrial action.

The role of our industrial program is to point the general direction the unions must take if they are to weather the employers' onslaught [see Kim Moody's article in *Changes* on "The Rank and File Movement"]. As pertinent as these ideas are, it is unlikely that they will become general union practice for some time. In fact, we expect this will not happen until a new leadership emerges within the unions. For now we hope to win the labor left to those ideas so that it can define itself in the struggle over labor's future. Such a program is a tactical guide. We do not propose that it be imposed on every opposition caucus and contract coalition. It is a sign post, a direction.

Likewise, a program for political action is something we are proposing and developing with a broader layer of radical unionists. We do not expect our program to become union policy soon. Like the industrial program, its implementation depends on the reform forces. Nor do we wish to impose it on every rank and file group etc. We do believe that a political strategy is as necessary as an industrial one.

There is always more than one response to a set of social conditions. Class collaboration and powerlessness is the dominant response, but it is not a long-term solution for the labor movement. At the same time, there is a very different response — much smaller but significant in that it represents the direction forward for labor.

There are activists in the trade union movement who recognize that the limitations of contract bargaining, the threat of multinationals, and the role of the government do not point to giving up militancy. Rather the answer to run-away corporations is to stop them politically, combined with still wider industrial militancy (eg, the secondary boycott) which in return will require a political offensive. The answer to a stagnant economy is political. The answer to the government's hostility to unions is political. Further, there

is wider recognition that labor's "traditional" relationship with the Democratic Party has been problematic and that labor needs more independent strength. If something as mild as labor law reform could not be won in a "veto proof" Congress with a Democratic president, the whole strategy has to be called into question. Labor is being ignored as Democrats compete with Republicans as tax cutters, deregulators, and defense spenders.

Virtually every wing of the labor bureaucracy, except possibly the Teamsters, is aware of the failure of labor's political efforts. In spite of a significant increase in political activity, organization, and technique by the unions over the past decade, labor's influence has visibly declined at virtually every level of American political life. This failure is not primarily due to any lack of effort by the bureaucracy, but to the type of political action. That is, the attempt to out-bid and out-work the ruling class for influence in the Democratic Party, state legislatures, and Congress within the context of dependence on capitalist parties and politicians, doomed virtually every political initiative by U.S. labor in the past 40 years. With the explosion of media politics, in which money counts more than leg work, and with the lock-step move to the right by the American ruling class, failure has turned into rout.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that for the first time in many years the tiny section of the labor movement which seriously discusses a labor party and independent political action has broadened.

The fight to spread this sentiment and to build a genuine movement for a labor party within the unions, however, does not arise in a political vacuum. The debate over "new" political strategies for labor is, in fact, a three-sided one. The "official" AFL-CIO strategy is to tighten the structure of the Democratic Party and boost the level of labor representation in the Party's leadership bodies. The first step toward that strategy was taken earlier this year when Democratic National Committee was re-organized to include a small number of top labor leaders. The strategy of much of the more liberal and social democratic sections of the bureaucracy continues to be the ever-futile attempt to reform the Democratic Party, making it into a more consistently liberal party — or in some variants even a labor party. Advocates of both strategies contemplate a more direct, official role by labor in primaries.

These strategies overlap with and color the other aspects of labor political action — lobbying, mass demonstrations, other pressure tactics. In particular, the phoney letterhead coalitions which engage in action formally independent of the Democratic Party, are seen as the vehicle for increasing labor influence in the Democratic Party. Like labor's functioning in the Democratic Party these coalitions are bureaucratic and sterile. The mass base of the coalitions are excluded from decision-making, and often from any form of participation, just as union members are excluded from decisions over labor's electoral activities.

The notion of an independent labor party and the allied notion of mass direct political action represent an alternative to the two major strategies now being debated. Furthermore, the labor party idea represents the only strategy that speaks to the fundamental reason for labor's political decline (and simultaneously the reason why the other two strategies will fail) — the dependence on the parties and politicians of another class.

The effects of the employers' offensive, the collapse of the Roosevelt coalition, and the general awareness that some form of political realignment is likely in the '80s adds extra strength to the labor party idea. Additionally, until recently the variants on changing the Democratic Party had the field to themselves. The labor party idea was thought of as unreal — and kept a silent point of principle by a small number of socialists — because no visible body of sentiment in favor of it could be pointed to. This is beginning to change.

► At the Labor Notes Conference, there was a high level of agreement among the left in the unions on the labor party. Tony Mazzocchi's (Health and Safety Director of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers) keynote address focused on the labor party, unsolicited by conference organizers. The audience voiced disappointment that Mazzocchi had no perspectives for action on the labor party.

► A left-wing has developed in DSOC which is interested in labor independent political action.

► 1400 delegates at the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers convention voted unanimously to support independent labor candidates in state and local elections. Amending a resolution on political action, the motion calls for endorsement of independent candidates who represent the interests of labor.

► Over 400 members and local leaders attended an American Federation of Government Employees national leadership conference in May, 1981 and adopted a resolution calling for intensified political action to defeat Reagan's cuts. Not included in the resolution, but a topic of much debate, was the question of a new, independent party for the labor movement. Perhaps a third of those present would support the call for a new party, and many others were interested in further discussion of the question. A motion calling for a

future discussion throughout the AFGE was passed.

► 120 California local union officials met May 15 to discuss steps towards a labor party. An ongoing Bay Area Coalition for a Labor Party already exists.

► The Machinists seem to be seriously involved in trying to chart some new political directions for labor. Recent issues of the IAM newspaper, *The Machinist*, focus on "Rebuilding of America Act" (a labor legislative program), developing more rank and file involvement in politics, and boosting the New Democratic Party (Canada) experience as a model for the U.S.

An introduction to a series of articles on the NDP in *The Machinist* (April, 1981) began:

Since the 1980 elections, a swell of sentiment has been surfacing around the country to establish a third political party. Some labor leaders and members see the nearly 55% of eligible voters who either refused to vote in the last presidential election or who voted for a third candidate as the base for building such a progressive or labor party. Others, including AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland, oppose such an idea, seeking instead to try and bring the Democratic Party back to its founding principles. IAM President William Wimpisinger has pledged to work with the AFL-CIO and try and refurbish the party. But he is also leaving open other options should that attempt fail.

The central themes of mass politics we work to develop are:

1) The solutions to the problems facing labor today require a more political attack. Plant closings, health and safety, capital shifts, anti-labor legislation, etc. must be met politically.

2) The problem with the labor movement's current involvement in politics is that it is the wrong kind. It flows from a strategy of class collaboration and the "junior partner in capitalism" notion. This "pressure group" strategy is a dead end. The deck is overwhelmingly stacked against the labor movement when it tries to compete with the business political action committees on their own terms (contributions, expert help, media campaigns, etc.)

3) Industrial militancy today requires a political expression to carry its program if it is to be able to pose a viable alternative to the unions.

4) The real power of the labor movement is in its ability to mobilize masses of people — mass politics.

5) Mass politics is not simply about election campaigns. It is also demonstrations, political strikes, mass lobbying, neighborhood and workplace organizing, etc.

6) Mass politics cannot be carried out bureaucratically. It requires an active, conscious rank and file and institutions where participation is real and democratic. Although most bureaucrats would like, abstractly, to have a mass following, to actually do what is necessary for mass participation would threaten the bureaucratic structure. Mass politics will require a struggle parallel to and related to the struggle for union democracy.

7) Mass politics requires winning the rank and file to the idea that it is right and essential that unions be involved in politics as unions.

8) The Democratic Party strategy which depends on bureaucratic relations, and fosters acceptance of class collaboration and worker powerlessness is a major barrier to mass politics. The logical conclusion of mass politics is a labor party.

9) Another question likely to arise down the road is running labor candidates in Democratic primaries. This is a tactic currently being considered by many of those who hold the "reform the Democratic Party" strategy. It will also be raised, however, from people who do not hold that strategy and who are even for the labor party idea. They will see this as a transition to, or even a form of, independent political action. In these cases we want to indicate our sympathy with their motives, but be clear that we believe this is a mistaken direction.

THESE IDEAS WILL HAVE TO BE popularized at different levels, and should be raised when relevant to specific situations and not as some litany.

One level is expanding educational work. This would include resolutions and articles on the need for mass politics and a labor party. Union papers, rank and file bulletins, party press, etc. are obvious places such articles should appear. Articles about labor and politics in other countries are another way to raise this issue.

Educational work could include local forums where the idea of independent political action can be discussed, and the possibility of running independent labor candidates in upcoming elections can be raised at such forums.

Resolutions for union conventions also provide an opportunity to raise the labor party, with local resolutions preceding the convention. In a few places, labor party resolutions could be put forward at central

labor bodies, state and local, where there are enough officials to get a significant minority vote.

The second level involves opportunities for cross-union organization.

For example, encourage the formation of broad committees to probe the question of labor politics. The California Bay Area Coalition might serve as a model.

Another strategy is to develop a "labor platform" which could formulate and popularize a series of ideas in the rank and file that are fundamental labor demands in politics. Seek union endorsement for this platform. Organize activities such as demonstrations and mass lobbying around the platform or parts of it. Try to establish the platform as a minimum for candidates. Perhaps build on the IAM's "Blueprint for Rebuilding America."

The third level involves activities that would build genuine rank and file political mobilization as unionists. This would include activities like demonstrations and mass lobbying. It would also include challenging the bureaucratic procedures in the union to give the membership more control over political involvement. For instance, attempts should be made to have "candidates nights" at union meetings, to have union members vote on endorsements of candidates. Some of this may mean working in some of the traditional and bureaucratic union structures like CAP and COPE, although this might only demonstrate the necessity of working around them.

Where feasible, a limited number of labor candidates for local, state and congressional elections can be proposed. They should run on a model labor platform and call for a labor party. Such candidates should be unionists and have the endorsement of a significant number of locals, though not necessarily of higher labor bodies.

There may be small radical third party movements like the Peace and Freedom Party or the Citizen's Party or independent candidates like Ross Cockerel in the future. Although these efforts tend to be overwhelmingly middle class, when they establish some credibility, they can be used to demonstrate the need for labor to break with the Democratic Party. Seeking labor support for these efforts can raise the question of independent political action in the labor movement.