
The Principles and Program of the Trade Union Educational League

by William Z. Foster

Published in *The Labor Herald* [Chicago], March 1922. Reprinted as a 4 page leaflet by TUEL, specimen in Comintern Archive, RGASPI, f. 515, op. 1, d. 156, ll. 1-2.

The Situation.

In every country but one an advanced state of capitalism has produced a highly developed trade union movement. The single exception is the United States. Here we have a very elaborate industrial system and the world's most militant and powerful capitalist class, but, paradoxically enough, a trade union movement which, for general weakness and backwardness, has few if any equals in the predominantly industrial countries.

No matter what vital phase of our trade union movement we consider we must admit, if we are honest, that the workers in other lands are ahead of us. In the important matter of numerical strength, for instance, we make a wretched showing. At present, considering the ravages made in our ranks by the employers, it is doubtful if we have as many as 4 million trade unionists in this country, or about 1 unionist to each 27 of the general population. England, by contrast, has approximately 7.5 million trade unionists, or about 1 in each 6 of her 44 million people. Germany shows with over 12 million trade unionists, or about 1 in each 4-1/2 of her 55 million population. In other words, the English trade union movement is proportionately about 4 times as strong numerically as ours, and that of Germany 6 times as strong. For the American unions to be as large as those of Germany, considering the difference in the size of the two na-

tions, they would have to have no less than 24 million members. Compare this giant figure with the paltry 4 million members that our unions now possess and one gets an idea of how far behind we are in this respect. In England and Germany (not to mention many other countries) the mass of the working class has been organized. In the United States hardly a start has yet been made.

Obsolete Craft Unionism.

Structurally our trade unions are equally backward in development. The American labor movement is the only important one in the world which still remains based upon the principle of craft unionism. In all other countries the main labor movements, accepting the logic of capitalistic consolidation, have endorsed the principle of having one union in each industry and have made great progress towards its realization. Throughout the rest of the world we find many single unions covering whole industries — such as building, metal, railroad, general transport, clothing, printing, etc. — that have been built up

recently by amalgamating the original craft organizations. Others are constantly being created. In England the giant new Transport and General Workers' Union amalgamation is taking place; the Amalgamated Engineering Union is likewise making substantial headway towards its goal of one union in the metal indus-



try; and in many other trades the process of consolidation is going on apace. In Germany the metal workers, during the past few years, have completed their record-breaking industrial union, which now counts 1.8 million members; the railroad, postal, telegraph, and telephone workers, already closely organized, are combining their forces into a great organization of 1.5 million member to control all forms of transportation and communication; and the workers in the other German industries are likewise closing up their ranks rapidly. In Belgium the original welter of craft unions has been hammered together into about a dozen industrial unions, and plans are now being worked out to combine the whole movement into one real union. The Australian workers have also just gone on record for a similar effort.

The same rapid drift towards industrial unionism is in evidence everywhere except in the United States. Here we are still sticking in the mud of craft unionism and progressing at only a snail's pace. Standpatism has become an ingrained gospel with our trade union officials. There is hardly a breath of progress among them. They disregard the obvious fact that as the capitalists close up their ranks the workers must do likewise. With rare exceptions they are content to plod along with anywhere up to 20 or 30 autonomous unions in the various industries and to consider such a primitive condition, with all its resultant craft scaberry and weakness, as the highest practical stage of trade union organization. The man who proposes common sense amalgamation along industrial lines they consider a dreamer, if not a disruptive fanatic. From the standpoint of structure the American labor movement is at about the point of development that the European unions were 15 years ago.

Our Political Infancy.

Politically our trade unions are also in an infantile condition. They have not yet advanced to the point of even rudimentary political class consciousness. Blissfully unaware that the class struggle rages in the political as well as in the industrial field, they are still trailing along in the train of the capitalist parties and shamefully begging favors from them. Their Cause is a football for every political crook inn the country — to the sad demoralization of the whole labor move-

ment. The workers in other countries were once in a similar boat, but they have all long since got away from it. Some, the anti-political tendency, have adopted the Syndicalist program of direct action on the political field through the trade unions, and others, retaining their belief in political action, have built up extensive Labor, Socialist, and Communist parties. But all of them — Syndicalists, Laborites, Socialists, and Communists — agree upon class action in the political field. They would laugh out of court any leader among them who dared advocate the antediluvian no-class political policy of the American trade union movement. For them the adoption of such a program would mean turning the clock backward a generation.

Another striking feature of our labor movement's primitiveness is its unequaled lack of idealism and social vision. It has no soul. It has not yet raised the inspiring banner of working class emancipation. So far as its vague conscious expressions go, it is still timidly and blindly trying to patch up wage slavery and make it endurable. It has still to learn that the only solution of the labor struggle is by the abolition of capitalism. In this sad position it stands alone, for the workers of all other important countries have long since definitely broken with capitalism. They look upon it as an obsolete social system which must be eliminated. They are looking forward to the establishment of a new proletarian society in which parasitical capitalists will be no more. They differ widely as to how this great goal can be achieved, whether capitalism shall be abolished piece by piece, as the Socialists propose, or all at one blow, as the Communists and Syndicalists urge. But they are unanimous that capitalism must go. The American trade unions are the only general body of organized workers in the world that have not yet mastered this fundamental labor conclusion. And the result is a tremendous weakening in their programs and fighting strength.

Our Pitiful Conservatism.

A striking illustration of this unparalleled intellectual timidity and conservatism comes to light in our trade unions' relations with the labor organizations of other countries. There are two world trade union federations, one with headquarters in Amsterdam, and the other in Moscow. The Amsterdam In-

ternational is reformist, and the Moscow International revolutionary. All the important labor movements of the world are affiliated with one or the other of these two Internationals — that is, all except ours. We stand aloof altogether on the ground that both are too revolutionary. Even the Amsterdam International, whose leaders undoubtedly saved capitalism in its greatest crisis by defeating the recent revolutionary uprisings in Germany, Italy, France, etc., is much too radical for us. Because its "revolutionary" doctrines might contaminate our pure bourgeois ideas, and for fear that our association with such a "terrible" organization would discredit us in the eyes of the America exploiters, the American Federation of Labor, not long since, severed relations with the Amsterdam International. This made us the laughing stock of the international labor world, revolutionary and reformist alike. When it comes to militancy of program we stand in a place by ourselves — at the very foot of the procession. And so it is with many other phases of our movement, which need not be cited here.

The general effect of the extreme political and industrial undevelopment of our trade union movement has been to greatly weaken the fighting power of the working class. More than ever this is evidenced by the present world crisis in industry. Whereas the trade unions of other countries are pretty much holding their own, or in some cases even forging ahead, ours are in disordered retreat before the victorious employers. The latter, strongly organized and controlling the press, the courts, and practically every section of the local, state, and national governments, are smashing the unions right and left and making ducks and drakes of the workers' political and industrial rights. The crisis is serious and so generally recognized that there is no need for us to waste words over it here. Suffice to say that if Organized Labor does not soon reorganize its primitive craft unions into modern industrial unions and infuse them with real fighting spirit it will inevitably suffer crushing defeat, if not actual annihilation.

The Source of Our Troubles.

Whence comes the ultra-conservatism and extraordinary backwardness of the American trade union movement? What causes the seeming paradox in this country of a very high degree of capitalism producing

a very low degree of labor organization?

Many are the answers made to this great riddle of the American labor movement. The chief of these are, first, that the conglomeration of races here, by greatly complicating the organization problem, has effectually checked the spread of trade unionism; and, second, that the workers in this country, because of its bonanza development, have enjoyed more prosperity than European workers and have consequently been rendered almost immune to militant organization.

But these answers are altogether unsatisfactory. The first is discounted by the fact that some of the very best unions we have, notably in the needle trades, are made up of many nationalities. And the second goes counter to all our labor history. Time and again the workers in this country have given convincing evidence of their aggressive spirit and adaptability to advanced types of unionism. A generation or so ago, during the stormy 1880s, our trade union movement unquestionably led the world for militancy. And since that time our industrial history has been marked with a whole series of strikes, as bitterly fought as any ever known anywhere. In view of these facts it is idle to maintain that our workers are naturally unmilitant.

The true explanation for the undevelopment of American trade unionism must be sought elsewhere. And it is to be found in the wrong methods used by our progressive and revolutionary unionists. Until quite recently they have failed utterly to realize and perform their proper functions. For a generation past they have been working contrary to the natural evolution of the labor movement. The result is stagnation and ruin all around.

One of the latest and greatest achievements of working class thinking, due chiefly to the experiences in Russia, is a clear understanding of the fundamental proposition that the fate of all labor organization in every country depends primarily upon the activities of a minute minority of clear-sighted, enthusiastic militants scattered throughout the great organized masses of sluggish workers. These live spirits are the natural head of the working class, the driving force of the labor movement. They are the only ones who really understand what the labor struggle means and who have practical plans for its prosecution. Touched by the divine fire of proletarian revolt, they are the ones who furnish inspiration and guidance to the groping masses.

They do the bulk of the thinking, working, and fighting of the labor struggle. They run the dangers of death and the capitalist jails. Not only are they the burden bearers of the labor movement, but also its brains and heart and soul. In every country where these vital militants function effectively among the organized masses the labor movement flourishes and prospers. But wherever, for any reason, the militants fail to so function, just as inevitably the whole labor organization withers and stagnates. The activities of the militants are the "key" to the labor movement, the source of all its real life and progress.

Vigor Elsewhere; Stagnation Here.

In other countries the militants, even while not consciously aware of the above principles, have quite generally acted in harmony with them. They have stayed in the old trade unions and, through their organization, activity, and determination, have been able to take the lead in directing the workers' struggle. They have communicated something of their own fire and understanding to the masses, with the result that their labor movements have been constantly pushed onward — intellectually, structurally, and numerically — to higher and higher stages.

But in the United States the militants, progressives and radicals alike, have taken a reverse course. For fully 30 years they have systematically deserted and neglected the trade unions. Afflicted with a chronic secessionism, they have attracted the overwhelming mass of the liveliest spirits among the workers to the futile projects of building up all sorts of dual unions based upon ideal principles. Thus the trade union movement has been sucked dry of thousands and thousands of the best militants, the very elements who should have been its life springs, and thus its development has been blocked, its progress poisoned at the source. By the desertion of the militants the unknowing masses have been intellectually and spiritually decapitated. Leaderless, helpless, they have been left to the uncontested control of a conservative trade union bureaucracy, which has hardly a trace of real proletarian understanding and progress anywhere in its makeup. In view of this situation it would be a miracle if the American labor movement, with its most vital factors practically cancelled, were in any other condition than one of

extreme backwardness.

Dual unionism, the set policy of secessionism, which has separated the life-giving militants from the cumbersome organized masses — that is the prime cause of the stagnation of the American labor movement. That is the underlying reason for our apparent paradox of the most aggressive capitalist class side by side with the most weakly organized working class. Dual unionism has hamstrung American labor.

What Must Be Done.

Two things are absolutely indispensable to the further life and progress of our labor movement: first, the militants must definitely and finally rid themselves of the dual union secessionist tendency that has negated their efforts for so long; and, second, they must thoroughly organize themselves within the trade unions for the effective application of their boundless energies and dynamic programs. When this is accomplished, then, and then only, can we look forward confidently to the American labor movement taking its proper place in the forefront of the world's trade union organization — a position which it occupied 30 or 40 years ago, before its militants became poisoned and ruined by dual utopianism.

Substantial progress is now being made towards the accomplishment of these two vital essentials. In the first place, the militant rebels are freeing themselves from dual unionism with wonderful rapidity; and in the second place, they are everywhere forming the necessary propaganda groups within the organized masses of trade unionists. The organization through which this new and most important movement of militants is taking shape is the **Trade Union Educational League**.

The **Trade Union Educational League** is an informal grouping of the progressive and revolutionary elements throughout the entire trade union movement; a potent means to assist these militants in the performance of their natural functions as the brain and backbone of the organized masses. It is not a dual union, nor is it affiliated directly or indirectly with any such. It does not issue charters, nor does it collect dues or per capita tax. For the revenue to carry on its work it depends upon voluntary donations from supporters and sympathizers, profits from the sale of lit-

erature, etc. It is simply a virile educational league, operating within and in support of the trade unions, and by no means in opposition to or in competition with them. It is an auxiliary of the labor movement, not a substitute for it. It is identical with the movements through which the militants in other countries have transformed their trade unions into real fighting organizations.

The League's Program.

The **Trade Union Educational League** proposes to develop trade unions from their present antiquated and stagnant condition into modern, powerful labor organizations capable of waging successful warfare against Capital. To this end it is working to revamp and remodel from top to bottom their theories, tactics, structure, and leadership. Instead of advocating the prevailing shameful and demoralizing nonsense about harmonizing the interests of Capital and Labor, it is firing the workers' imagination and releasing their wonderful idealism and energy by propagating the inspiring goal of the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of a workers' republic. The League aggressively favors organization by industry instead of by craft. Although the craft form of union served a useful purpose in the early days of capitalism, it is now entirely out of date. In the face of the great consolidation of the employers, the workers must also close up their ranks or be crushed. The multitude of craft unions must be amalgamated into a series of industrial unions — one each for the metal trades, railroad trades, clothing trades, building trades, etc. — even as they have been in other countries. The League also aims to put the workers of America in cooperation with the fighting trade unionists of the rest of the world. It is flatly opposed to our present pitiful policy of isolation, and it advocates affiliation to the militant international trade union movement, known as the Red Trade Union International [RILU]. The League is campaigning against the reactionaries, incompetents, and crooks who occupy strategic positions in many of our organizations. It is striving to replace them with militants, with men and women unionists who look upon the labor movement not as a means for making an easy living, but as an instrument for the achievement of working class emancipation. In other words, the League is working

in every direction necessary to put life and spirit and power into the trade union movement.

How the League Organized.

The **Trade Union Educational League** groups the militants in two ways: by localities and by industries. In all cities and towns general groups of militants of all trades are formed to carry on the work of education and reorganization in their respective localities. These local general groups, to facilitate their work, divide themselves into industrial sections — such as printing, building, textile, railroad, metal, clothing, transport, etc. All the local general groups are kept in touch and cooperation with each other through a national corresponding secretary. Likewise, all the local industrial educational groups are linked together nationally, industry by industry, through their respective corresponding secretaries. Every phase and stage of the trade union movement will have its branch of the life-giving educational organization.

Let the railroad industry illustrate the general plan: In every important railroad center there will be educational groups of railroad men, not of single crafts, but of the whole 16 in the industry. These local groups will cooperate nationally through a secretary (a volunteer unless the local groups find ways, through donations, to pay him). A national program will be established and a great drive instituted to combine the 16 squabbling unions into one solid body. Amalgamation will be made a burning issue all over the country wherever railroad men meet and talk. From the live wire section man in San Diego, California, to the rebel engineer in Portland, Maine, the whole body of railroad militants will move unitedly and irresistibly to the accomplishment of their task, the erection of a great and powerful industrial union of railroad workers by the amalgamation and invigoration of the 16 craft unions. The union leaders refuse to carry out this absolutely indispensable project, so it is up to the rank and file militants to do it for themselves.

The **Trade Union Educational League** will make great use of pamphlets, bulletins, journals, etc., in its educational work. Its official national organ is ***The Labor Herald***, a monthly published at \$2.50 per year. ***The Labor Herald*** is carrying a burning message of constructive unionism and solidarity to the dis-

contented rank and file. It is filled from cover to cover with the living, dynamic organization principles which can find no place in our static, muzzled, dry-as-dust official trade union journals.

The launching of the **Trade Union Educational League** marks a turning point in American labor history. It is the beginning of an era in which the trade unions, flourishing under intensive cultivation by their organized militants, will gradually pass from their present hopeless defensive fight into an aggressive attack upon Capital, an attack which can end only with the abolition of the wage system. The program of the **Trade Union Educational League** is the only possible effective answer to the "Open Shop" drive of the employers; it is the sole means by which the American working class can take its proper place in the world battle of Labor.

Active trade unionists ready to cooperate in the work of the League are requested to write to the undersigned for further information.

*William Z. Foster, Sec'y-Treas.,
118 N LaSalle St.,
Chicago, Ill.*

Edited by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2007. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.