

# The New Progressive Movement

By Arne Swabeck

The Conference for Progressive Labor Action (Muste Group) has emerged as a definite trade union oppositor with an elaborate program and a proposed membership basis of groups and individuals.

The program of the C. P. L. A. contains points worth noting, as for instance:

- Demands for social insurance.
- To assist in organization of industrial unions in basic industries with aggressive fight on the picket line and against the power of the courts to issue injunctions and their attempts to cripple unionism.
- To encourage working class education.
- To help establish farmer and labor co-operatives.
- To urge independent labor action.
- Support of the struggle for the six hour day.
- Opposition to expulsions from trade unions for political beliefs.

To urge the workers to demand the wealth they create and to strike for their right as of old.

Unquestionably this program and its militant terminology to a large extent reflects the pressure of genuine left wing policies and activities of the past. It is a progressive program, most of its points being identical with those sponsored by the T. U. E. L. This new movement is a direct outgrowth of the increasing class pressure upon the workers in trustified industry and is one expression of working class organization. The almost complete disappearance of an organized left wing has facilitated the emergence of the C. P. L. A. at this time. These are facts of the greatest significance. They demand attention and a correct attitude from the Communists.

In industry everywhere the pressure upon the workers is increasing. More speed-up, more machinery, more uncertainty of employment. The present faint gropings of the workers for a way out will, in the course of its natural process, turn into more definite channels. The unorganized, unskilled and semi-skilled workers in the basic industries, who here and there begin to stir, are becoming ready material for organization. Those in the unions will be compelled to seek new policies, new methods, which will go beyond the obsolete craft barriers and challenge reaction.

## NEW SPIRIT IN OLD UNIONS

Simultaneously the reactionary trade union leadership is marching ever more into the open as the agents of capitalism. In union administration and strategy the policy of the employers is becoming more dominant. Actually to prevent organization of the unorganized is now the main concern of these flunkies. Yet to conclude that the A. F. of L. and kindred unions are passing out of existence would be entirely wrong; or even to deny the possibility of a certain growth. The lower functionaries who are closer to the rank and file and more subject to its pressure will feel themselves compelled to move for expansion. The Chicago Federation of Labor is a case in point.

Recently by resolution a committee was established to carry on organization to further increase the union ranks. While this committee is composed of paid officials from the affiliated local unions bringing with them all the conservative craft prejudices, the action itself is nevertheless a response to pressure of conditions. Lately also on several occasions almost unanimous sentiment for the building of a labor party and discarding the A. F. of L. time worn political policy has been voiced at meetings in quite militant terms.

Our limited experiences have already quite clearly established the fact that the building of new unions in basic industries is conditioned upon the waging of the most militant struggle and facing the most ferocious persecutions. This is vividly brought out in the Southern textile mills. Would it then be reasonable to expect that the workers who become ready for organization will in mass numbers entirely discard the existing unions which have a tradition behind them? Hardly. On the Pennsylvania railroad, for instance, the unions are now — in agreement with the bosses — organizing the shop crafts.

Surely in the present objective conditions there are many favorable possibilities for the growth and development of a broad progressive movement. To deny this is tantamount to denying the present beginning of radicalization of the workers, which, although not yet of large ramifications, will ever more express itself both among the unorganized workers in basic industry and among those in the trade unions. On the whole, the ideology of the American workers is yet the one inculcated by capitalism. To expect that they should at once tear themselves loose from all capitalist influences and completely accept communist leadership will be a pure expectation having no foundation in facts. To pursue a policy based on the supposition that these working masses are waiting for the Communists to assume the direct lead — which the Party endeavors to establish by mechanical means — without traveling the road of intermediary steps, can only lead to disaster and isolation.

## BEGINNING OF REVOLT

The signs indicating the present trend of the workers, even including the formation of the C. P. L. A., show the beginning of revolt against the growing reaction of the officialdom. A definite class ideology by no means exists as yet. Our task is still the one of struggling for a class movement of the American workers. This of course presupposes the compact organization of a left wing capable of developing and broadening its influence in the course of struggle, exposing the reformists aspiring to leadership and pro-

methods of the left wing.

The C. P. L. A. in its organizing conference, made an attack upon the Communists. This was done partly to preserve their own appearance of respectability, but mainly to solidify the influence of their own reformist position. To the workers, however, the one thing must remain decisive that any group proposing to organize a progressive movement to the exclusion of the Communists will neither be able nor have the slightest intention of actually leading the workers in revolt against the reactionary policies of the A. F. of L. bureaucracy, much less against American imperialism. Their aim is, rather, to keep all such developing movements within "safe, legal" channels and prevent the actual and necessary revolt.

## LEFT WING TACTICS

Yet it would be entirely too narrow and un-Marxian a view to identify the progressive movement which this period will develop merely by these aspiring leaders, even though they may be the very ones instrumental in unloosing the forces of great potentialities. Such is the destiny of the new progressive movement: it must either turn into more definite, more left, more revolutionary channels and discard its reformist leaders or become merely a shield for reaction and disappear in a merger with it.

The official attitude so far taken by the "new trade union line" of the Party in refusing to recognize the forces these elements represent and the coming movement they express in its first stage, is simply lumping them all with the A. F. of L. bureaucrats in one hodge podge, has nothing to do with Communist tactics. The present moment calls for the united front tactic with an independent policy and merciless exposure of the reformists, fakery and betrayers; a constant pressure to make the present grandly proclaimed program a program of realities, carried into life in the movement; constant pressure for more definite left wing and revolutionary policies. In this process the reformist leaders will be discarded and the left wing will prove its worth as the only force able to bring these policies to their correct conclusion.

## VINCENT ST. JOHN

The death of Vincent St. John at San Francisco marks the passing of another of the great figures of the American revolutionary movement whose deeds helped to make its tradition and whose names will not be forgotten. "The Saint", as he was known, by those who knew and loved him, died at the age of 56 after a long illness complicated by high blood pressure. He will be sincerely mourned by thousands whose lives were influenced by him, particularly by those who belonged to the old guard of the I. W. W. in its bravest days when he was its moving spirit and guiding intelligence.

Vincent St. John, like Haywood and Frank Little, was trained in the hard school of the Western Federation of Miners, that model labor union whose mighty struggles threw their shadow across the world in the latter years of the Nineteenth Century and the first years of the Twentieth. A metal miner by trade, he joined the Western Federation in 1894, and became one of the most militant fighters in its ranks and an influential voice in its councils. Despite his modesty of disposition, his freedom from personal ambition and his lack of the arts of self-aggrandizement, his work spoke loudly and brought him widespread fame. His stirring deeds as a pioneer organizer became legends of the movement and remain such today. Until 1907 he was a member of the executive board of the W. F. M. and in that strategic position became the leader of the left wing in the looming struggle between conservative and revolutionary unionism which centered around the question of affiliation to the I. W. W. which the Western Federation had played a major part in founding in 1905.

At the second convention of the I. W. W. in 1906 St. John headed the revolutionary syndicalist group which combined with the S. L. P. elements to oust Sherman, a conservative, as President and establish a new administration in the organization with a revolutionary policy. He became the general organizer under the new administration, breaking with the W. F. M. on the withdrawal of the latter body, and giving his whole allegiance to the I. W. W. He presided at the 1908 convention which saw the split with the S. L. P. and the elimination of the "political clause" from the preamble. St. John was the leader of the proletarian "Direct Action" forces which defeated the "political" wing of De Leon. Thereafter he served as General Secretary of the I. W. W. until 1914, and undoubtedly did more than anyone to shape its course and prepare the ground for its later development under the active leadership of Haywood.

He withdrew from activity on leaving the office of General Secretary and engaged in a mining enterprise, doubtless with the illusory hope of acquiring a fortune to help finance the organization of the workers. Despite his retirement at the period, fear of his abilities and the prospect of his return to the office vacated by the imprisonment of Haywood dictated his own arrest and subsequent conviction with the Chicago group of I. W. W. wartime prisoners. He served two and a half years at Leavenworth before commutation brought his release.

From his earlier concepts of revolutionary socialism St. John, in revolt against the parliamentary reformism of the Socialist Party and the sectarian, ultra-legal concepts of the Socialist Labor Party, developed along the line of revolutionary syndicalism, the path taken by many of the best proletarian fighters of the period. In many respects this represented a step forward from parliamentary

or industrialist position were storing up disasters for the future. The philosophy of the I. W. W., which St. John did so much to shape, was too simple for the complex situation brought about by the entry of the United States into the World War. The great sacrifices and heroic deeds of its members were unavailing against this handicap and were greatly discounted by it. The spirit of the I. W. W. died in the war, and not the least of the signs of this tragedy was the loss of faith of practically the entire body of the old guard which had made its history and its glory. St. John was among them. Spiritual death is the real death of revolutionaries.

To the great loss of the workers' cause, St. John, and with him the great majority of the leading militants of the I. W. W., failed to make the theoretical and tactical adjustments necessitated by the experience of the World War and the Russian Revolution. Their limited industrialist concepts remained unchanged. Communism, especially its American re-embodiment, impressed them unfavorably and they could not swim with the current of the new movement. The enormous errors, presumptuousness and tactlessness of the Party leadership are partly responsible for this calamitous state of affairs. American Communism should have been a natural growth out of the soil of the pre-war movement represented in part by the I. W. W. The early years of the Party were weakened and hampered by this failure and the I. W. W. movement, alienated from Communism, lost its old-time vigor and passed into an inevitable degeneration and decline.

But despite the tragedy of the after-war years the earlier work of the I. W. W. militants — and St. John in the front rank — retains all its validity. They wrote much of the tradition of the American revolutionary movement in letters of fire that will never be extinguished. The modern movement of Communism, which is the heir to their achievements, should value this tradition highly and honor the memory of the men who made it. The memory of Vincent St. John will always be a treasure to the revolutionary workers of America in their aspiring struggle for the workers' world.

For those who knew "The Saint" as a man and friend his untimely death brings a deep and poignant grief. He was a most admirable personality — brave and resolute, loyal and honest. He was a gifted and inspiring leader and organizer who gave himself, throughout the years of youth and manhood prime, unflinchingly and unselfishly to the workers' cause. And with the highest executive qualities he combined the rare gift of friendship, of warmly human consideration and concern for others, of loyalty in personal relations, which bound men to him in lifelong affection. Those who were so bound to him, who knew the warmth of his handclasp, enshrine his memory in their hearts along with the best memories of the great cause for which we live and strive.

Hail and farewell, Soldier, Man and Friend!

## Gastonia in Danger

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movement of defense to the exclusion of all other working class forces. Instead of solidarity they showed dissension: instead of uniting the movement, they divided it. The mass movement arose in spite of them. The momentum of the movement swept over these triflers and succeeded in becoming a power despite these reactionary leaders. The policy of International Labor Defense in those days brought it the support of hundreds of thousands of workers, increased its prestige, and called into existence the largest mass movement the country has ever seen since the strongest days of the Mooney fight.

Grave consequences will be reaped by the defense unless this policy is adopted by the Communists and the I. L. D. in the Gastonia fight. Up to now, the defense work and agitation has been conducted on a most narrow and irresponsible scale. The united front has been sunk without a trace. Instead of welcoming outside support, the Party has repulsed it. Instead of inviting united aid, the Party has preferred to proceed alone in its "pure" ultra-"Left" madness. The Gastonia "unity" conferences of the I. L. D. have been organized on the most limited basis conceivable. In Chicago, the frivolous Stalinist dabblers refused to seat the delegates of the Communist League (Opposition at the defense conference because — they are "counter-revolutionaries"). We denounce this as a criminal attempt to carry on the factionally corrupt splitting game of the Stalinists at the expense of the Gastonia defendants.

There is not the slightest reason why the Left wing cannot arouse a broad inclusive movement for the defense of Gastonia on the same scale as the movement we set into motion in defense of Sacco and Vanzetti. There is not the slightest reason why the unity for support and defense of the Passaic strike cannot be repeated in the case of Gastonia.

Gastonia is in danger! The labor movement in the South has the knife to its throat. Every worker must answer. The banner of unity, not the flag of sectarian isolation and partisan primacy, can become the standard that will rally every honest element in the working class to the stirring appeal of Gastonia.

## Tempus Fugit

"The leader of the Canadian Communist Party, unfortunately, used to be an ex-comrade by the name of Spector." — Jay Lovestone, The Communist, January-February, 1929.

Tempus fugit! The lea

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