

Where Is the Left Wing Going?

An Answer to William Z. Foster with a Footnote on his Political Biography

By James P. Cannon

William Z. Foster, who has succeeded Lovestone as the chief of American Stalinism, makes his debut as an unfettered warrior against "counter-revolutionary Trotskyism", after a long and discreet silence on the subject, in the July number of "The Communist". The publication of Foster's article ("Right Tendencies at the Trade Union Unity Conference") opens a debate on the trade union question which the Stalinists avoided as long as possible.

In his first attack on the Opposition Communists Foster justifies his appointment to the leadership of American Stalinism by an exhibition of those talents and methods which he perfected in the school of Gompers and which have contributed not a little to the corruption of the Communist movement in America since his belated adhesion to it. The Communist movement will be the gainer by this forced discussion of specific questions at issue and by the occasion it offers to examine the personal qualities and the history of Foster which have made him the logical "successor" to Lovestone as the warden of the Stalin barracks.

The first task in replying to him is to clear away the fog and put the questions as they are. Foster tries to represent matters as though we are opposed to organizing the unorganized. That seems absolutely incredible to anyone familiar with the facts. But Foster, evidently proceeding on the theory that nobody reads or remembers what he reads, puts it down in type as the keystone of his argument against us. And to make the case "stronger" he links our position with that of Lovestone whom yesterday he helped to expel us.

A few facts will suffice to dispose of this falsification. "The Communist" for July, 1928 contained an article by me, which was a digest of my speech at the May, 1928 Plenum of the C. E. C. In this article, which outlines views consistently maintained since that time, I insisted on a course "to put the main emphasis and center of gravity in its trade union work on the organization of the unorganized and the preparation for strikes". This was the main theme of my article, although the necessity of combatting any tendency to leave the old unions was also underscored. Foster's attempt to represent us as opposed to this line and to connect us with Lovestone who really opposed it, is quite amazing when it is recalled that the same issue of "The Communist" in which my article appeared also contains an article by Foster, as a sort of reply to me, written, as the introduction states, at the instruction of Lovestone C. E. C. and "expressing the C. E. C. position."

Our trade union position does not change from day to day and we maintain now, as before, despite the incalculable damage being done by the adventurist and irresponsible policy of the Party, that the organization of the unorganized must be the first point on the left wing program in the present situation. This idea is brought out in our platform and it runs through a dozen or more articles in The Militant dealing with various phases of trade union work.

THE REAL DIFFERENCES

But this matter does not end with Foster's falsification and our exposure of it. The differences between us on this point are real enough and they consist in this:

For us the organization of the unorganized and the formation of new unions is only one phase—although at present the most important phase—of our program and is indissolubly connected with the work in the old unions and the slogan of trade union unity. For the Stalinists the formation of new unions and the empty chatter about a new revolutionary trade union center have become a trade union program in themselves.

For fear of facing the whole issue this has not yet been stated in clear and definite programmatic form. But it is the plain implication of all the talk nowadays, and it is the practice. The T. U. E. L. as a left wing in the old unions does not exist any more. The nature of the current propaganda precludes any serious work in the A. F. of L. One could easily compile a page of quotations from the Party press to show

THE MILITANT

Published twice a month by the Communist League of America (Opposition)

Address all mail to: P. O. Box 120, Madison Square Station, New York, N. Y.

Publisher address at 332 18th Street, New York, N. Y.

Subscription rate: 1.00 per year. Foreign \$1.50

5c per copy Bundle rates, 3c per copy.

Associate Editors:

Editor: Martin Abern

James P. Cannon Max Shachtman

Maurice Spector

VOL. II. AUGUST 15, 1929 No. 13.

Entered as second-class mail matter November 28, 1928, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y. under the act of March 3, 1879.

that the policy is understood to mean that we are to join the new unions and leave the A. F. of L. One quotation from the pen of the eminent Patrick H. Toohey, Secretary-Treasurer of the National Miners' Union, in the Daily Worker of May 24, illustrates the drift:

"The many thousands of honest workers who are still in the A. F. of L. will quickly learn that they are being betrayed and will leave it to join with the unorganized workers of the entire country." (our emphasis).

Foster, the most careful writer, expert in the use of the qualifying clause, past-master in the art of "leaving the door open" so that his words can be interpreted to mean one thing or the direct opposite—depending on the way the cat jumps—furnishes the inspiration for the conclusions of the cruder Tooheys. In the Daily Worker of May 13 Foster wrote as follows:

"By the same token that it would be wrong to draw these individual workers into the corrupt A. F. of L. unions, so it would be incorrect to try to affiliate them collectively through the new unions to the A. F. of L. The A. F. of L. leadership does not want such revolutionary unions and even if it should in any case accept them it would only be to destroy them."

These two quotations are the same in essence and they are both wrong because they set up a dogma which cannot always be followed. If we are in principle opposed to drawing individual workers into the A. F. of L., if we consider it incorrect to try to affiliate them collectively, and if this attitude is motivated, as Foster motivates it, by the fact that "the A. F. of L. leadership does not want such revolutionary unions", then Toohey is correct also about the necessity of the honest workers leaving the A. F. of L. Green and Company do not want them either. With such views how can a left wing be consolidated for a stubborn fight in the old unions? It cannot be done, and because of such views which now dominate the Party policy it is not being done.

These tactics are false. They spell isolation and defeat for the left wing, the strengthening of the reactionary strangle-hold on the unions and the eventual defeat of the program for organizing the unorganized. And of all those responsible for the damage these false tactics are doing to the future of the Party, Foster is the most culpable. He is not one of those brainless wind-bags who are able to talk themselves into the belief that the new "Revolutionary Trade Union Center" is just what the workers are waiting for. He knows better, and supports a false policy out of factional expediency and personal opportunism. This is a crime against the working class.

THE PROGRESSIVES

In his article in "The Communist" Foster gingerly touches on the question of the united front with the progressive elements in the unions against the reactionaries which was the main strategy of the Party in the trade unions since 1921 and which Foster advocated in his book "Misleaders of Labor" as the key to the conquest of the unions.

Now Foster dismisses the whole strategy with a few words, repudiates seven years of Party trade union work under his direction and dumps overboard the book which embodied his settled conclusions on the trade union movement—all in a few sentences which make no attempt to explain the error of the old policy or the reasons for the new one. Everything is covered with the soul-saving formula: we made a mistake and the R. I. L. U. corrected us. It would be more merciful and humane to "educate" the left wing workers with a club than to slug them with such methods.

The new progressive movement in the trade unions is a symptom of rank and file pressure which will very probably show greater vitality in the future. The Communists should regard it fundamentally from this standpoint and steer a course toward contact with it, regardless of the shady character of some of those represented in its present leadership. Since when did this become wrong and why?

Only a year ago, in his article in the July 1928 "Communist", referred to above, Foster wrote:

"The middle group will tend to organize and cooperate with the left wing. The so-called Muste Group, while not in itself large, is an evidence of this tendency. To consolidate the real opposition forces in the old unions, is the task of the T. U. E. L."

The explanation of the error in these conceptions is Foster's task, not ours. We still maintain them. But he tries to avoid that duty by ascribing the policy of the past exclusively to us and, with characteristic generosity, by giving us "credit" for some particularly gross mistake of his own.

"Cannon... was one of the very worst defenders of the erroneous united front policy of the T. U. E. L. He understood it and fought for it to mean that we should make alliances with every crook and faker in the labor movement who made even a pretense of being in opposition to the ruling labor bureaucracy. This was the substance of his conception of trade union work."

Who? Where? When? This is a very strong accusation which ought to be supported by some facts and proofs. Since Foster fails to supply them, we will make up the deficiency. The only time and place this was a serious issue dividing the Central Committee was in the Needle Trades and particularly in the I. L. G. W. U. In 1925 when Sigman was in a conflict with other sections of the bureaucracy, over questions of patronage, after he had expelled the Left wing, the Foster faction proposed to make a combination with the Sigman forces to secure a majority at the 1925 convention in Philadelphia. We fought this utterly unprincipled combination which threatened to undermine the moral and ideological foundations of the Left wing and combined with Ruthenberg to defeat it. The whole story is told in the minutes of the Political Committee for that period. There it appears on the agenda a half a dozen times with a half a dozen motions from us prohibiting it. We challenge Foster to make these minutes public. This will be far more convincing than general accusations which cannot be supported.

But, while we fought against the abominable horse-trade with Sigman and others of the same stripe which Foster also proposed, we declined to join in the orgy of purity and repentance which came afterward and which wanted to do away with all dealings with all fakers under all circumstances. We were, and are, against this theory because it condemns the Left wing to sterility and destroys its maneuvering capacity. It is in reality only the reverse side of the Sigman proposal and is almost equally harmful.

THE SLOGAN OF UNITY

One of the greatest weaknesses in the current trade union policy of the Party is the withdrawal of the slogan of unity. This was a central slogan of the Party and one of its mightiest weapons in the fight against the reactionaries. The slogan of unity was one of the most effective means of mobilizing the masses in the needle trades under the left wing banner. And conversely, although there are other factors, the decline of left wing power and influence and the revival of the rights in this field are closely related to the dropping of this slogan.

These light-hearted reversals of basic policy are made all the more reprehensible by the failure to offer any explanations. They are carried out in a purely administrative way by decision of committees as though the masses did not exist. The education of the Party is stifled by these methods and the masses cannot understand what the Communists want. In these conditions the reactionaries and the socialists grow and consolidate at the expense of the Communists, and the Right Wing in the Party is nurtured.

This process, now clearly visible, is part of the fruit of the "new line" of counterfeit Leftism. The National Conference of the T. U. E. L. can really serve the cause of the workers if it calls a halt to this course and steers the trade union work of the Left wing back onto the main line of revolutionary policy. A formal ratification of the adventurist tactics which Foster and others are now propagating will weaken the position of the Left wing still more and make its recovery more painful and difficult.

* * *

Stalin Centrism selects the instruments which are qualified to serve its mission which is to befool the banner of Communism and destroy the Communist International. It attracts to its service those who adapt themselves easily and swim with the current. It creates a happy hunting ground for the bureaucrat and careerist. It bestows the marshal's baton on those who can reconcile contradictions and change positions in the shortest time. The consecration of Foster as the new American chief of Stalinism is not without logic and a reason. His past has prepared him for the present, as an outline of his career will show. His record is a record of zig-zags and changes from right to left according to the mutations of the working class movement. Above all others he has shown that he knows how to adapt himself. And this is the first requirement of a Stalinist overseer.

FOSTER'S ZIG-ZAG RECORD

Foster began his career as a revolutionist, first in the Socialist Party and later in the I. W. W. This is an important fact to remember in connection with his later activities and allegiances. He left the I. W. W. in 1911 at a time of low ebb in the fortunes of that organization of militants and went to the A. F. of L. There, according to his own testimony and that of Gompers and Fitzpatrick before the Senate Committee investigating the Steel Strike, some extracts of which are printed on another page, he adapted himself to the philosophy of Gompers, so much that he found no obstacle in rising to high positions by official appointment.

During the war the tide ran strongly against the "Reds" and Foster, by his own testimony, went with it,—for the war. He who had been a revolutionist fought on the other side of the barricades in those fate-