

# The New Unions and the Communists

By James P. Cannon

In the correspondence from the Illinois coal fields there is room for serious thought. These informative and authoritative letters from the fields of battle—models of proletarian journalism giving a fresh meaning to the term "Workers' Correspondence"—cast a searching light upon a disease in the new union movement which threatens its existence.

This sickness consists—to speak plainly—in the importing into the new unions the labor fakers' arts under the fraudulent banner of "Communist leadership". To the shame of Communism this rotten business held the stage under the Communist Party auspices at the District Conference of the National Miners Union at Belleville, Illinois. And the scene enacted there was only a replica, made cruder by enlargement, of the routine game being played in all the new unions and which is evoking in all of them the inevitable revolt.

## The Foster Wrecking Crew

This strangulation and disruption of promising movements for the organization of the workers in important industries is becoming an old story. For a long time the situation among the marine workers has been crying aloud for industrial organization. Experienced and capable militants are not lacking for the job—men who have been thru the mill, who enjoy the confidence of the seamen and know how to organize them. But, thanks to the Foster wrecking crew, the marine workers organization has its being largely in the bombastic headlines and lying news stories of the Daily Worker. The position of the Auto Workers Union was recorded in a letter from Detroit printed in a recent issue of The Militant. The Party bosses have "captured" this union, captured it and locked it up in the Party office where the auto slaves will never find it. The Needle Trades Industrial Union, which had the most favorable chances of all, is today only a pale shadow of what it might have been. And the National Textile Workers Union—the football of Party factionalism since its ill-starred birth—lies paralyzed while the Party experts debate and golden opportunities go by. The new union movement as a whole, inoculated with the Foster medicine, is reeling like a victim of poison moonshine.

## What is the matter?

Like the left wing organizations in all spheres of labor activity, this great potential movement of new unionism is registering the ruinous effects of the internal crisis of the Communist Party. The appointed Party leaders carry over into the mass organizations the same foul practices which signalize their rule in the Party. They set as their first task the control of the new unions, and they effect this "control" by methods that insult proletarian intelligence as they offend proletarian morality.

Unearned and appointed leadership has no faith in itself. It prefers mechanical control of half-dead organizations to the struggle for influence in living movements. Foster and Company want "leadership" in the new unions insured in and guaranteed in advance by mechanical measures. Ninety per cent of their "mass work" and 99 per cent of the funds at their disposal are devoted to this barren accomplishment. The result is an absolutely artificial selection of the leading bodies of the new unions and a stifling of their inner life.

Everything is cut and dried in these unions. There is little for the members to do at the meetings except listen to long-winded speeches. There is nothing for them to decide—everything is decided for them in advance. Intelligent non-Party workers are systematically squeezed out thru the application of the asinine formula—which follows the doctrine of the "Third Period" as pestilence follows famine—that everybody who is not a Communist is a traitor. Every Party quarrel is immediately transferred into the union, and one who gets crossways with the Party regime immediately becomes a target for slander and frame-up, as, is now the case with John Watt, president of the National Miners Union.

The reckless gambling with the Workers movement which marked the career of the Lovestone faction as the American representatives of Stalinism, has been elaborated in previous documents—documents which Foster signed jointly with us. The conduct of the present Party bureaucracy, headed by Foster who learned from Gompers, is distinguished from that of Lovestone only by a vaster clumsiness and ignorance.

## Belleville's Significance

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in their deepest ranks towards a genuine workers' movement. The explosion at the Belleville convention of the miners—where 40 or more delegates bolted—is an alarming reminder of this conflict. We see in the miners union—and not only in the miners—the portentous appearance of a line-up of honest rank and file elements against the Party; or, rather of the Party against the rank and file militants—for the Party militants are the aggressors in the whole evil circumstance and are responsible for it.

This revolt from below against neofakerism tricked out in counterfeit Communist badges, which broke out in the Miners' Union and which smolders in others, is a sign of internal health and strength. The question whether it will remain a negative protest or become a positive force for the regeneration of the movement is a burning one. Indeed matters have come to such a pass that the part to be played by the new unions in the stormy days ahead hinges upon that question.

The answer lies in the first place with the politically conscious forces of the Communist vanguard who alone are capable of grasping the problem in its manifold aspects and of organizing the struggle to cope with it.

Without the intervention of the most conscious and uncorrupted elements in the Communist ranks to right the situation the left wing will pay for the sins of Party mismanagement with a recrudescence of syndicalism. Signs of this already are not lacking.

For this struggle we have no new or magic formulas and none are needed. The teachings of Leninism on the work of Communists in the trade unions, as laid down by the fundamental documents of the Communist International, are a sufficient guide. It is time to study them again, to make them part of the consciousness of the revolutionary workers and to set them up against the monstrous perversions practiced today in the name of Communism.

The new unions are at a fork of the road. One way—the way of the Party bureaucrats—leads to degeneration and collapse; the other to a period of expansion and healthy growth for which all conditions are favorable. In the interest of the latter it is of vital importance now for the members and supporters of the Communist League to bring into the foreground some fundamental conceptions, to make a sharper and more aggressive fight for them in

the unions and to organize the conscious militants inside and outside the Party for this fight. The issue must be brought into the open before the workers. The Foster fakers will howl about our exposure of the shameful game they are playing at the expense of the movement. Let them howl! And see that stronger blows are dealt against them.

The organization of the workers for the elementary struggle is the primary revolutionary task, and the building of the new unions the most important medium for its execution. The revolutionaries will fulfill their historic task only to the extent that they understand the proper relations between the masses and the vanguard and create an internal regime in the unions which attracts and holds the masses.

## The Need For Workers Democracy

This means a struggle to make the new unions democratic organizations in reality, and not merely in hypocritical declarations. They must function as self-sufficient bodies, freely determining their own course, working out their own rules and selecting their own leaders. The right of expression for various divergent political views and tendencies must be firmly established. The workers who are banded together there for a common struggle against their exploiters must be able to feel that they are in their own house, not the tolerated guests of the Party. The meetings, conferences and conventions of the new unions must have a formal and binding character.

Only so can the new unions develop into genuine mass organizations and unless they become such they are doomed. They must aim to include in their ranks not simply Communists and a fringe of sympathizers, but the masses, without whose participation the unions have no power. Not only the politically conscious, but the politically indifferent, the backward and even the reactionary (who are the vast majority) must find a place in the unions. Formal proclamations on this score are plentiful but mean nothing. What is necessary is a deliberate course in this direction.

The leading forces in the new unions ought to represent a united front of the Communists with the progressives. The shallow-minded, phrase-mongers imagine that the formation of new unions disposes of the vexing problem of progressives. A greater absurdity is hardly conceivable. There is not a single organization of workers which expands beyond the paper bounds of a Party "auxiliary"—that is to say, of a duplicate of the Party membership

—where a united front with the progressives is not a categorical condition for growth and development. In America there are only a few thousand scattered Communists among millions of politically indifferent and reactionary workers. The key to the unity and consolidation of the new unions, to the problem of leadership and the expansion of revolutionary influence is combination of the revolutionary with the progressive-minded workers. Without this it is impossible under the present conditions to organize new unions on a mass basis. Pig-headed insistence on a Communist monopoly of the directing organs does not—as experience has amply demonstrated—result in Communist leadership of the masses. It simply results in the exclusion of the masses from the union.

## The Mechanical Control Disease

The mechanical control sickness must be eliminated if the new unions are to live. There is nothing revolutionary in the dogma that Communists should control the unions by arbitrary and bureaucratic means. The French Communist Party was severely condemned for this very nonsense at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International when Lenin and Trotsky were at the helm. It is the refuge of feeble people who are afraid of the rough and tumble fight for influence and leadership. In its effect it is sectarian and reactionary. It has become a fetter on the development of a workers mass movement—the primary revolutionary task—and a source of discredit to Communism.

Communist leadership of the masses is one of the prerequisites for the revolutionary victory of the proletariat. But, conversely, the organization of the "million masses"—to use De Leon's classic phrase—is likewise a preliminary necessity to the constitution of a genuine class movement on the road to a struggle for power. It is only in this process that the revolutionary leadership can expand. Tactics and methods at this stage of events ought properly to be judged by how they help or hinder this work of organizing the masses. And by this standard the "mechanical control" idea stands condemned.

Leadership of the masses cannot be "captured" without their knowledge or consent. Communist influence which precedes and evolves into leadership can only be based on service to the broad workers' movement which the workers understand and approve. Serious and consistent work for the building of the new unions in preparation for the great impending struggles will do more than anything else at the present time to promote the influence of the Communists. Clear the way for this work.

## MINNEAPOLIS FOR GASTONIA

Following the issuance of a call for a Unity Conference for Gastonia Defense, signed by active militants in the labor movement of Minneapolis and St. Paul, a large and representative gathering met at Labor Headquarters, October 29, to discuss and act upon the frame-up of the Gastonia textile fighters and the massacre of the Marion strikers.

The meeting was called to order by acting secretary Carl Skoglund, who set forth the object of the conference, namely: to acquaint the workers of Minneapolis with the situation in the southern textile industry, especially the Gastonia trials, and to inaugurate a campaign in Minneapolis to aid the workers in defending themselves while organizing. Skoglund then called for nominations for temporary officers. He was elected as temporary chairman and A. G. Edmunds was chosen temporary secretary. The agenda for the conference was then read and adopted.

Upon a motion, a credentials committee of three was appointed by the chairman, consisting of Lee R. Miller of the Electrical Workers, John A. Nelson of the Steam Fitters and Helpers, and V. R. Dunne of the Communist League of America.

## Hedlund Speaks on Case

C. R. Hedlund, well-known left-wing fighter in the Engineers union gave a short summary of the various labor disputes in past labor history and called attention to the new persecutions that are taking place in the Southern textile industry. He urged all workers to unite for the purpose of defending all attempts of workers to organize and to bring all the labor forces into action on behalf of working class defense. The credentials committee then reported the following organizations and delegates in attendance.

Steam Fitters and Helpers, Local 539: John A. Nelson, Platers and Polishers: P. J. Neuman, Broom Makers Union: F. S.

Seake, Bernadotte Lodge, No. 20, I. O. G. T.: Egan Soneson and August Brodin, Electrical Workers Union, Local 202: Lee R. Miller, A. W. Henry Cook and Ed Lawrence Painters Union Local 292: William Lundgren, Stanley Anderson and A. Boerback, Promethean Club, Y. P. Unitarian Society: Arnold Anderson, Mercedes Nelson and Robert Happ, Communist League of America (Opposition): V. R. Dunne, Simon Barach and Carl Cowl, Maintenance of Way Employees, Lodge 144: W. McDonald, Thomas Rudd and Bennie Schrewer, Socialist Party: Leo Gissell, Minneapolis Federation of Teachers: Amy Edmunds, Alice Dreschler and M. Dietrichson, Workers Club of Minneapolis: Herbert Howes, Warner Day and Morris Hanson, Viking Lodge, No. 10, I. O. G. T.: Sten Gagner, Alfred Engman and Helmer Augustson, Capmakers Union Local 12: I. Hoberman and P. Gordon, Independent Workmen's Circle Br. 89: D. Moses, Sam Lessin and Mrs. Schwartz.

All were seated, as well as the signers of the provisional call, and Skoglund was chosen permanent chairman with A. G. Edmunds as permanent secretary.

The opinions of the delegates being then called for, all delegates agreed that whatever differences of opinion might exist among organizations, unity can and must be had on the question of defending persecuted workers. A motion was made that the conference call a public mass meeting as soon as possible to acquaint the workers of Minneapolis with the Gastonia and Marion situations and amended that another such conference be called before such a mass meeting takes place in order to insure greater success. The amended motion was adopted.

All organizations represented by delegates were asked to elect one representative on the executive committee, and the permanent officers were instructed to call an executive committee meeting as soon as

possible after the selection of that body.

Resolutions were adopted protesting against the convictions in Charlotte and demanding the release of the prisoners, and another expressing solidarity with the Marion strikers and protesting the murder of five workers by the sheriff and his thugs. Copies were sent to the Governor of North Carolina, to President Hoover, to labor organizations and the press.

The success of the Minneapolis conference shows the tremendous reservoir of support that can be obtained for the defense of Gastonia if a genuine effort is made to organize united action. That such action has been bitterly opposed up to now by the leaders of the Communist Party makes the task more difficult, but, as Minneapolis shows, far from impossible



## MINNEAPOLIS CLASSES OPEN

The Minneapolis Branch of the Communist League of America (Opposition) announces the opening of winter classes for the study of problems facing the labor movement. Two classes are now open: (1) A B C of Communism, with Carl Cowl instructing; (2) American Labor History, with Karl Skoglund instructing. Cowl's class opened Tuesday evening, November 19th at 401 Washington Avenue South at 7:45 p. m. Registration for the classes can be made by all workers by applying to the School Committee at Box 45, Minneapolis.



## THE NEXT ISSUE

The next issue of the Militant will contain the following special articles: Disarmament and the United States of Europe, by L. D. Trotsky; Is the A. F. of L. Becoming Progressive? by Arne Swaback; The Results of the Czecho-Slovak Elections and the Crisis in the Communist Party, by H. Lenorovic; How to Organize an Action Swindle, by M.