

Communism and Syndicalism - - by L. Trotsky

The trade union question is a most important one for the labor movement and, consequently, for the Opposition. Without an exact position in the trade union question, the Opposition will be unable to have a real influence upon the working class. That is why I believe it necessary to submit here, in the discussion a few considerations on the trade union question.

The Party and the Trade Unions

1. The Communist Party is the fundamental arm of revolutionary action of the proletariat, the combat organization of its vanguard that must raise itself to the role of guide of the working class in all the spheres of its struggle and consequently in the trade union field.

2. Those who, in principle, oppose trade union autonomy to the leadership of the Communist Party, oppose thereby—whether they want or not—the most backward proletarian section to the vanguard of the working class, the struggle for immediate demands to the struggle for the complete liberation of the workers, reformism to Communism, opportunism to revolutionary Marxism.

Revolutionary Syndicalism and Communism

3. Pre-war syndicalism, at the enthusiastic epoch of its expansion, by fighting for trade union autonomy, actually fought for its deliverance from the bourgeois government and its parties, among them the parliamentary socialist party. It was the struggle against opportunism—revolutionary methods. Moreover, revolutionary syndicalism did not make a fetch of the autonomy of the mass organizations. On the contrary, it understood and preached the leading role of the revolutionary minority in the mass organizations, which reflect the working class with all its contradictions, its weaknesses, its backward point of view.

4. The theory of the active minority was, in reality, an uncompleted theory of a proletarian party. In all its practice, revolutionary syndicalism was an embryo of a revolutionary party, contrary to opportunism which was nothing but a caricature of revolutionary Communism.

5. The weakness of anarcho-syndicalism, even in its classic period, was the absence of a theoretical basis and, as a result, a poor understanding of the nature of the government and its role in the class struggle; an incomplete and, consequently, a wrong conception of the role of the revolutionary minority, for example, the Party. Thence the mistake in tactics, such as the fetishism of the general strike, the incomprehension of the necessary connection between the insurrection and the seizure of power, etc.

6. After the war, French syndicalism found not only its criticism but also its development and its completion in Communism. To try to revive revolutionary syndicalism would be to try to make history go backwards. For the labor movement these attempts can only have a reactionary significance.

The False Disciples of Syndicalism

7. The false disciples of syndicalism transform (in words) the independence of the trade union organizations from the bourgeoisie and the reformist socialists into independence in general, into absolute independence from all the parties, the Communist Party included.

If, in its period of expansion, syndicalism considered itself a vanguard, and fought for the leadership of the vanguard minority among the backward masses, the false disciples of syndicalism fight at present against the identical wishes of the Communist vanguard, attempting, though without success, to base themselves upon the lack of development and the prejudices of the most backward sections of the working class.

8. Liberation from the influence of the bourgeoisie cannot be a passive state. It can express itself only by political acts, for example by the struggle against the bourgeoisie. This struggle must be inspired by a distinct program which requires organization and tactics for its execution. It is the union of program, organization and tactics that makes the Party. In this way, the real independence of the proletariat from the bourgeois government cannot be realized unless the proletariat conducts its struggle under the direction of a revolutionary and not an opportunist Party.

9. The false disciples of syndicalism would have one believe that the trade unions are sufficient to themselves. Theoretically, this means nothing, but in practice it means the dissolving of the revolutionary vanguard into the backward masses, as is shown by trade unionism. *

* A distinction is made here between trade unions and trade unionism and "syndicates" (the French word for labor

It is by embracing large masses that the trade unions best fulfill their mission. A proletarian Party merits its name only if it is ideologically homogeneous, bound by unity of action and organization. To represent the trade unions as able to suffice to themselves, as though the proletariat had already attained its "majority", is to deceive the proletariat, is to picture it other than it is and can be under capitalism, which keeps enormous masses of workers in a retarded state of ignorance, leaving only the vanguard of the proletariat the possibility of carrying out a passage through all the difficulties, up to the clear comprehension of the tasks of the its whole class.

The Real Autonomy of the Trade Unions Is Not Assailed by Party Leadership

10. The real, practical and not metaphysical autonomy of trade union organization is not disturbed in the slightest degree and it not diminished by the struggle for influence of the Communist Party. Every member of the trade union has the right to vote as he thinks necessary and to elect the one who seems to him most worthy. Communists possess this right in the same way as others.

The conquest of the majority by the Communists in the directing organs takes place quite in accordance with the principles of autonomy, for example, the self-administration of the trade unions. On the other hand, no trade union statute can prevent or prohibit the Party from calling the general secretary of the Confederation of Labor to its central committee, for here we are entirely in the domain of the autonomy of the Party.

11. In the trade unions, the Communists, of course, submit to the discipline of the Party, no matter what posts they occupy. This does not exclude but supposes their submission to trade union discipline. In other words, the Party does not impose upon them any line of conduct that contradicts the state of mind or the opinions of the majority of the members of the trade unions. In entirely exceptional cases, when the Party considers impossible the submission of its members to some reactionary decision of the trade union, it points out openly to its members the consequences that flow from it—when it is a matter, for instance, of measures enacted against the Communist concerning trade union posts, expulsions and so forth.

With juridical formulae in these questions—and autonomy is a purely juridical formula—one can come to naught. The question must be posed at bottom in the concrete reality of trade union policy. A correct policy must be opposed to a wrong policy.

The Character of the Party's Direction Depends Upon Specific Conditions

12. The character of the Party's direction, its methods and its forms, can differ profoundly in accordance with the general conditions of a given country or with the period of its development.

In capitalist countries, where the Communist Party does not possess any means of coercion, it obviously can gain the leadership only by the Communists being in the trade unions as rank and file members or functionaries.

The number of Communists in leading posts of the trade unions is only one of the means of measuring the influence of the Party in the trade unions. The most important factor in evaluation is the percentage of rank and file Communists in relation to the whole unionized mass. But the principal criterion is the general influence of the Party on the working class which is measured by the circulation of the Communist press, the attendance at meetings of the Party, the number of votes at elections and, what is especially important, the number of workmen and women who respond actively to the Party's appeals to struggle.

13. It is clear that the influence of the Communist Party in general, and in the trade unions in particular, will grow the more revolutionary the situation becomes.

These conditions permit an appreciation of the degree and the form of the true real and not metaphysical autonomy of the trade unions. In times of "peace", when the most militant forms of trade union action are isolated group strikes, the direct part of the Party in trade union action falls back to second place. As a general rule, the Party does not make a decision on every isolated strike. It helps the trade union to

unions). French is usually different from the classic English and American type by the fact that the former are organized by industry and the latter, usually, by trade or craft.—Ed.

decide the question of knowing if the strike is opportune and well engaged, by means of its political and economic information and by its advice. It serves the strike with its agitation, etc. First place in the strike belongs, naturally, to the trade union.

The situation changes radically when the movement rises to the general strike and still more to the direct struggle for power. In these conditions, the leading role of the Party becomes entirely direct and immediate. The trade unions—naturally, not those that pass to the other side of the barricade—become the apparatus of organization of the Party which, in the presence of the whole class, stands forth as the guide of the revolution, assuming the whole responsibility.

In the field extending between the isolated group strike and the revolutionary insurrection of the class are divided all the possible forms of reciprocal relations between the Party and the trade unions, the various degrees of direct and immediate leadership, etc.

But under all conditions the Party tends to win general leadership, by relying upon the real autonomy of the trade unions which, as organizations, it goes without saying, are not "submitted" to it.

The Political Independence of the Trade Unions is a Myth

14. Facts show that politically "independent" trade unions exist nowhere. There have never been any. Experience and theory say that there never will be any. In the United States, the trade unions are directly bound by their apparatus to the general staffs of industry and the bourgeois parties. In England, the trade unions which, in times past, mainly supported the liberals, at present constitute the material basis of the Labor Party. In Germany, the trade unions march under the banner of the social democracy. In the Soviet Republic, their direction belongs to the Bolsheviks. In France, one of the trade union organizations follows the socialists, the other the Communists. In Finland, the trade unions were divided only a little while ago to go one towards the social democracy, the other towards Communism. That is how it is everywhere.

The theoreticians of "the independence" of the trade union movement have not taken the trouble up to now to think of this question: why their slogan not only does not approach its realization in practice, anywhere but why on the contrary, the independence of the trade unions to the leadership of a party becomes everywhere, without exception, more and more evident and open? Yet, this corresponds entirely to the character of the imperialist epoch, which bares all class relations and which even within the proletariat, accentuates the contradictions between its aristocracy and its most exploited sections.

The Syndicalist League, Embryo of a Party

15. The most recent expression of the today outstripped syndicalism is the Syndicalist League (*Ligue Syndicaliste*). By all its traits, it comes forward as a political organization which seeks to subordinate the trade union movement to its influence. In fact, the League recruits its members not in accordance with the trade union principle, but in accordance with the principle of political groupings: it has its platform, if not its program, and it defends it in its publications; it has its own internal discipline within the trade union movement. In the Confederal congresses, its partisans act as a political fraction in the same way as the Communist fraction. If we are not to be lost in words, the tendency of the Syndicalist League comes to the struggle to liberate the two Confederations from the leadership of the socialists and Communists and to unite them under the direction of the Monatte group.

The League does not act openly in the name of the right and the necessity, for the vanguard minority, to fight to extend its influence over the most backward masses; it presents itself masked by what it calls trade union "autonomy." From this point of view, the League approaches the socialist party which also realizes its leadership under cover of the words: "independence of the trade union movement". The Communist Party, on the contrary, says openly to the working class: here is my program, my tactics and my policy, which I propose to the trade unions.

The proletariat must never believe anything blindly. It must judge every party and every organization by their work. But the workers should have a double and treble distrust towards those pretenders to leadership who act incognito, under a mask, who make the proletariat believe that it has no need of leadership in general.

The Proletariat Does Not Demand the "Autonomy" of the Trade Unions but a Correct Leadership

16. The right of a political party to fight to win the trade unions to its influence must not be denied, but this question must be posed: in the name of what program and what tactics is this organization fighting? From this point of view, the Syndicalist League does not give the necessary guarantees. Its program is extremely vague, as are its tactics. In its political estimations, it acts only according to circumstances. Acknowledging the proletarian revolution and even the dictatorship of the proletariat, it ignores the party and fights against Communist leadership without which the proletarian revolution would greatly risk remaining a phrase devoid of sense.

17. The ideology of trade union independence has nothing in common with the ideas and sentiments of the proletariat as a class. If the party, by its direction, is capable of assuring a correct, clear-sighted and firm policy in the trade unions, not a single worker will have the idea of rebelling against the leadership of the Party. The historical experience of the Bolsheviks has proved that.

This also holds for France, where the Communists received 1,200,000 votes in the elections while the C. G. T. U. has only a fourth or a third of this number. It is clear that the abstract slogan of autonomy cannot permit one to touch the masses. Quite another thing is trade union bureaucracy. It not only sees professional competition in the Party bureaucracy, but it even tends to make itself independent of control by the vanguard of the proletariat. The slogan of independence is, by its very basis, a bureaucratic and not a class slogan.

The Fetish of Trade Union Unity

18. After the fetish of "independence," the Syndicalist League transforms the question of trade union unity into a fetish also.

It goes without saying that the maintenance of the unity of the trade union organizations has enormous advantages, as much from the point of view of the daily tasks of the proletariat as from the point of view of the struggle of the Communist Party to extend its influence over the masses. But the facts prove that since the first successes of the revolutionary wing in the trade unions, the opportunists have set themselves deliberately on the road of scission. Pacific relations with the bourgeoisie are dearer to them than the unity of the proletariat. That is the sure result of the post-war experience.

We Communists are interested in every way to prove to the workers that the responsibility for the split of the trade union organizations falls back upon the social democracy. But it does not at all follow that the empty formula of unity is more important for us than the revolutionary tasks of the working class.

19. Eight years have passed since the trade union split in France. During this time, the two organizations have fought each other violently like two mortally hostile political parties. In these conditions to think of being able to unify the trade union movement by the simple preaching of unity would be to nurture illusions. To declare that without the preliminary unification of the two trade union organizations not only the proletarian revolution, but even a sufficiently serious class struggle is impossible, means to make the future of the revolution depend upon the corrupted clique of trade union reformists.

In fact, the future of the revolution depends not upon the fusion of the two trade union apparatuses, but the unification of the majority of the working class around revolutionary slogans and revolutionary methods of struggle.

At present, the unification of the working class is only possible by fighting against the agents of class collaboration who are found not only in political parties but also in the trade unions.

20. The real road leading to the unity of the proletariat is found in the development, the redressing, the enlargement, the consolidation of the revolutionary C. G. T. and in the weakening of the reformist C. G. T.

It is not excluded but, on the contrary, very likely that at the time of its revolution, the French proletariat will enter into struggle with two Confederations: behind one will be found the masses and behind the other the aristocracy of labor and the bureaucracy.

The Character of the Trade Union Opposition

21. The new trade union opposition obviously does not want to enter u