

# The New Industrial Unions

The Mass Organizations of the Workers or Narrow Party Sects?

By Arne Swabek

The new industrial unions organized under Communist Party leadership, have in the short period of their existence in several instances succeeded in inspiring workers to militancy; they have thrown fear into the hearts of the exploiters. But they also have shown serious failures caused by basically wrong policies.

The efforts to organize new unions in the unorganized industries remain as necessary and as correct as ever. But since the new line of the "third period" these efforts have become caricatures of what they should be, mainly through the basically wrong conception of "revolutionary unions", from which so many other mistakes flow. If this were merely a matter of grandiloquent phraseology with which this period is "enriching" itself, it might possibly be ignored. But unfortunately it has become an actual conception. The results of this can only be that the splendid opportunities available for organization become entirely neglected; the working masses, growing more ready for struggle, become alienated from these unions and the unions themselves will come to occupy a position of narrow sects, isolating the Left wing from the working masses.

## Revolutionizing the Unions

Unions become revolutionary in revolutionary periods, and in general, when, having a mass basis, they reflect the degree of development of the workers. When separated in exclusive crafts or skill trades they naturally lag behind this development; but even the most backward ones can in such periods be pushed forward, though they usually remain several steps behind the working class. It is the duty of Communists to help and to guide this process of revolutionizing the unions. It will certainly require the most persistent, devoted activities and struggle of the revolutionists to organize new unions in the unorganized industries, but the false conception of "revolutionary unions" in the United States at the present degree of development of the working class, when even a revolutionary party does not yet exist as a mass factor, if continued, completely annihilates the necessary mass basis of the unions. This is what is happening now, made yet worse by extremely adventurist, Leftist enterprises, manoeuvring without any regard for responsibility to the working class.

As a natural consequence of this essentially wrong conception, the Party appears in the role of exercising complete mechanical control over these unions. It prevents the development of a leadership coming from out of the ranks of the workers—a leadership which could stand on its own feet and gain the confidence of the membership. Selection of leadership thus becomes arbitrary, based exclusively upon the prerequisite of ability merely to accept orders and such leaders usually have the least experience. Independent views, in general conformity with the Left wing program of the unions, are not even tolerated. Communists and Left wingers who disagree with Party bureaucrats are arbitrarily removed from office and barred from participation in the work. These digressions are quite inevitable when mechanical control becomes substituted for the correct method of establishing Communist influence. Mechanical control has nothing in common with Communist leadership and the results cannot be without effect upon the union membership who see in it only a repetition of the A. F. of L. bureaucracy. It destroys the confidence of the workers in the unions, narrows its leadership basis and separates the Party ever more from many valuable experienced elements. This in turn becomes one of the important reasons for many mistakes in policy.

## The Third C. I. Congress on Trade Unions

The correct relationship of the Communist Party toward the unions could not be more explicitly stated than in the theses of the Third Congress of the Communist International, then still under the leadership of comrades Lenin and Trotsky:

"To increase the union of the Party with the masses means above all a closer alliance with the workers' organizations. The task does not at all consist in mechanically and outwardly subjecting the unions to the Party and thereby denying them the autonomy required by the very nature of their work, but in the revolutionary, Communist elements within the unions

giving them that direction which answers the general interests of the proletariat in its struggle for the conquest of power." (Emphasis in original.)

And further, under the heading "The Tasks of Our Parties":

"The real test of the strength of every Communist Party is the actual influence it has on the workers in the labor unions. The Party must learn how to influence the unions without attempting to keep them in leading strings. Only the Communist fraction of the union is subject to the control of the party, not the labor union as a whole. If the Communist fractions persevere, if their activity is devoted and intelligent, the party will reach a position where its advice will be accepted gladly and readily by the unions."

The establishment of the "revolutionary trade union center", the T. U. U. L. could have become an important factor in strengthening Left wing influence. The organization of a center for Left wing activity and groups is not only correct but a pressing necessity. Its basic conception, however leads it in the opposite direction. The conception of a center in the sense of a new federation at the present time, naturally means a head on clash with the old unions for the control of the workers, coming long before the Left wing has succeeded in establishing and extending its influence.

## New Unions Everywhere?

From that follows competition for building of unions all along the line also in organized or partly organized industries. The fight of the Left wing becomes one not against the reactionary leadership of the existing unions but against the unions as such, and certainly it can appear in no other way to the workers. Where some Left wing elements are still within the old unions they split off—as the whole policy is a split policy—and completely withdraw all Left wing activities from the A. F. of L. and kindred unions. It is a split policy, not applied when it is necessitated by developments, but resulting in the "revolutionary center" getting the small fraction outside isolated from the mass section of organized workers while the reactionary bureaucrats, who are an integral part of the capitalist structure are enabled to solidify their influence over these masses.

One of the most recent examples of this development is the creation of a couple of small unions in New York with big pretensions to an industrial form and affiliated to the T. U. U. L., appearing as split off sections: the new Subway Workers Union and the new Building Service Union. Their course will be one of so many of its small split-off predecessors. They will lead a sectarian existence until they disappear, unless they grow sufficiently conservative to again become part of the organizations from which they split. In industries where the existing unions are more firmly established the result will just be much more fatal because such policy has nothing in common with the conquest of the majority of the working class by the Communists.

Of the new industrial unions none has escaped suffering under these wrong conceptions and wrong policies. The Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union is but a fraction of the once powerful Left wing influence among these workers. The National Textile Workers union is now facing a decline in the South despite the favorable objective conditions. In both instances may be noted the failures of the Left—which means the Communist Party—to attempt to develop united front actions with the workers in A. F. of L. unions. It might be objected that reactionaries oppose it, that they betray the workers or lead them in fake strikes, etc. These are not valid objections. The workers in both industries suffer intolerable conditions, they have been engaged in struggles which would give the Left wing the opportunity through efforts for united action to broaden their contact with the masses, better expose the betrayers, turn the demands of the struggles into more genuine accord with the interests of the workers and give them more political and revolutionary content. The growth of the National Miners Union has certainly suffered from the mechanical manoeuvres. The recent experience of

wrong policies preceding and during the Illinois strike is already making its effects felt more deeply.

Every mistake made strengthens the position of the A. F. of L. bureaucracy. But these mistakes are typical of the Centrist leadership as directed throughout the International by the Stalin regime. They zig-zag from Right to Left, from unity with the betrayers of the British general strike to extreme leftists chatterings, which in reality isolate and weaken the Left wing in the labor movement. It should be remembered that at the time we introduced the correct conception in to the Communist Party of organizing the unorganized industries, Foster joined with the Lovestone group in opposition. Ever since then the Centrist Party leadership has been feeding and strengthening the Right wing Lovestone group by giving it apparent justification for much of their criticism.

## The Responsibility of the Right Wing

The Right wing in turn carries heavy responsibility for the present Leftist rantings and irresponsible mechanical manoeuvring with workers interests. When in control of the Party, it proved itself master of such manoeuvring. It consistently opposed the conception of organization of the unorganized into new unions. Now it is trying to take up our criticisms as a cover for the introduction of its own tendency toward social reformism into the labor movement.

The present epoch is the epoch of capitalist decay and proletarian revolution. It is now further accentuated by the present advancing industrial depression. If it teaches Communists anything in winning through the unions an influence over the majority of the working class, it teaches that the new industrial unions must have a mass basis and that the policies must be shaped so as to accomplish this. One necessary part of this is the correct coordination of the Left wing within the unions with the Left wing and opposition movements within the A. F. of L. There can be no disputing the necessity of taking up in earnest the work of building a revolutionary ideology and understanding within the existing mass organizations and giving it organized expression. We must also accept the duty of organizing workers into these mass organizations where they exist and stop the senseless split off of small sections.

The advancing period of depression poses many serious questions to the Communist movement; but especially does it pose the one of correctly applying the united front policy in such a manner as to bring the largest sections of both the old unions and the new unions into united struggle for their class interests. Once that is learned, a big step will have been taken toward extending Communist influence among the American workers.

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# Cleveland Labor News

By John Foley

CLEVELAND—The garment workers strike has been settled with a weak compromise, accepting the 42-hour week as against the 44-hour week they were working. They struck for the 40-hour week and as fine a display of solidarity of workers as ever existed was manifested in this struggle. The union shops came out to the man, and about 700 from the non-union shops are still trying to get recognition from the American Plan Shops, this city being the national headquarters of the American Plan Association.

As a spectator at the Garment Workers Union convention a couple of months back at the Public Auditorium, listening to resolutions calling for Bronze Convention Badges being turned into Gold Badges for spineless officers, I don't think that the American Plan Association will have much trouble defeating this jellyfish of the old International Ladies Garment Workers Union that once affiliated with the International Federation of Trade Unions of Amsterdam-Second International fame. But I don't think it makes much difference whether they are sold by International Ladies Garment Workers Union or driven by the American Plan Association.

In regards to the trial of 11 demonstrators arrested in the City Council on December 2nd the case was nolleed on account of capitalist hoodlums trying to get rid of the city manager in Cleveland. At the last two meetings of City Council, they turned this dignified, august sanctuary of priests into a bedlam, according to the daily murder sheets, into scenes similar to the French Revolution. The judge admonished the group of laughing Communists and said he had a sense of humor and would not allow them to martyr themselves in his court.

I wonder if the bourgeois judges think that breaking into jail is martyrdom. Their rotten system of starvation and eviction is the cause and jail is the only home the worker has got under capitalist production.

I had the American Civil Liberties Union defend me, the other ten the I. L. D. Because I employed the American Civil Liberties Union the I. L. D. sent me a letter that my bond would be withdrawn the next day! It seems that the worker that went my bond had more spirit of solidarity in the workers movement than the secretary of the I. L. D. in District 6 and refused to withdraw it. I suppose he will be disciplined for this breach of Stalinist Communism.

I travelled the slave market today looking over the situation. I find in Cleveland about one hundred unemployed for every single job that shows up.

On January 17, 1930, at three p. m. we held a meeting on Public Square. It was very cold but a couple of hundred unemployed stood in the cold to listen to speakers. One wobbly whom the workers have respect for, has been co-operating with the International Brotherhood Welfare Association, the Communist Leaguers, the Anarchists, the emergency program of the Industrial Workers of the World and the official Industrial Workers of the World members all responded to the call of organizing the unemployed and unorganized workers. I spoke at the first meeting and explained that these organizations represented flows of social forces in society and they all called for the class war, and we could all fight the common enemy together, use the movement for recruiting grounds for members, as no organization has a monopoly on unemployed and misery, and use the movement also as a training ground for dynamic rebels.

But of course, you know we have the remnants of Lovestoneism and Amerism and the hero-worshippers yet in Cleveland, although we have a new district organizer, Anthony Bimba, and a Trade Union Unity League secretary, Douglas. They may or may not be responsible, but due to mechanical control and suppression of unemployed expression. All these elements mentioned above withdrew their cooperation. The burlesque tactics of artists and bourgeois-trained youth looking for careers and ego expression hung the crepe on the movement as far as real spirit is concerned. We have had the finest type of fighting spirit, the most dynamic individuals of past class battles all working together here. When these fellow-workers start organizational work, the comrades of Stalin fame become so jealous that they try to lightning-rod and smother the work