

Passaic Strike Anniversary

Some Lessons in Militant Labor Leadership for the Future

By James P. Cannon

Experience is the capital of the labor movement no less than of other human enterprises. The generalization by which we steer toward Communism are not drawn out of thin air but are the concentrated experience of the international working class. Marxism established its place as the only valid theory of the proletariat because it alone stood this test. Experience is the laboratory of the science of revolution. Those who discovered and invent tactics without the aid of this laboratory and in defiance of it substitute guesswork for science and thereby confuse and weaken the workers' movement.

This is the present day practice. It accounts for the orgy of experimentation in all fields of activity which is running through the Party like a virulent influenza. The results of this guessing-game are very harmful for our experience, though limited is fresh and rich and much can be learned from it to the advantage of the workers' movement. Moreover there is no better nor easier way to teach the workers than by examples near at hand. American experience has a tenfold value for the education of the American workers, including the Communists. What we have we should treasure—and study.

The anniversary of the great Passaic strike which has just passed by the Party unnoticed is a case in point. That was the first large-scale experience of the Party in the direct organization of the workers for economic struggle; it was the biggest job was carried through in the most workmanlike and responsible manner. Would not the manifold experience of this strike be an excellent source of study for the industrial work of the Party today especially in regard to the organization of the unorganized.

Our leaders evidently do not think so. The Passaic strike occurred before the "Third Period". Therefore it doesn't count. Therefore, forget it; or, if it is mentioned at all, refer to it, as Browder did in an article some time ago, as a "shameful page in our history". Such a remark serves only to establish the measure of Browder. It does not in any way effect the validity of the methods employed in the Passaic strike. They stand out with conspicuous import and merit against the dubious tinkering which is being passed off by the Browders as trade union tactics.

The management of the Passaic strike was a brilliant illustration of the effectiveness of united front tactics which were, are and will be the heart and core of the Communist struggle for the masses. The united front, the guiding line in all phases of the direction of the Passaic strike was vindicated in all of them on a scale which looms colossal in contrast to the sad results which have followed its rejection.

A few of the outstanding features can be mentioned:

The strike was a genuine movement of the workers. The great majority of the workers employed in the mills were drawn into the struggle and held solidly together for months. It was a strike which paralyzed the mills and never had the character of a putch or flare-up. The masses were in it and behind it. The Communists held the unquestioned leadership although there was but a handful of Communists in the mills when the strike began. By their services and skill the Communists led the workers with a moral authority that needed no mechanical manipulation; moral authority which, in the final analysis, is the rock on which real leadership is based. Under such conditions every step, every turn in tactics required by changes in the situation, could be and were executed with the knowledge and consent of the masses of the strikers. Compare this demonstration of real leadership with some of the recent exploits and "forced marches" of the Party under the "new line", such as, for example, the disgraceful exhibition in the Illinois coal field. Cannot something be learned from this comparison?

The reactionaries were isolated and non-party forces effectively utilized in the Passaic strike. The reactionaries were busy with efforts to disrupt the Passaic strike no less than in others. But here the Communists by their tactic, cut the ground from under their feet and robbed them of all influence. The most important weapon in

this fight was the slogan of unity. This slogan has more power to move the masses than any other and in Passaic the Communists kept it always in their hands; and with it kept the leadership, despite all the machinations of the reactionaries. The Communists appeared before the strikers, as they were in fact, the champion of a united struggle, and thereby held their allegiance.

Side by side with this isolation of sabotaging representatives of the A. F. of L. there was a skillful and successful utilization of non-party elements in the leading bodies, both from the ranks of the strikers and from the outside. Notable among the latter was Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. This practice contributed not a little to the broadening of the base of the leadership and the strengthening of its support from below. It is a prerequisite for success in mass organizations at the present stage of development in America. The problem presents itself in every struggle that breaks out of the narrow circle of immediate Party influence. The present leadership do not understand this. They cannot even find room for dissenting factions of the Communist movement in the unions they control. They knew no way to deal with the independent opinions of such an honest and influential militant as John Watt except to frame him up and throw him out. They do not know how to disarm and isolate reactionary disrupters with the slogan of unity. These are some of the reasons why they stage putches instead of real mass struggles like the Passaic strike.

The Passaic strike mobilized non-party mass support on a national scale. This was before the three million organized workers of America were given up as "social-fascists". The conservative trade unions were deeply penetrated with the issue of Passaic. The Left wing gained access to more unions on this occasion than on any other in its history with the exception of the Sacco Vanzetti campaign. Conferences on a scale for which the present day caricatures offer no standard of measurement were organized throughout the country. In many cases even the most conservative officials were forced into line by the sweeping appeal of the issue. Funds to the extent of hundreds of thousands of dollars for the support of the strike, which came through these conferences, were an indication of their mass support. All this work was most effectively stimulated by a vast propaganda conceived in terms of a mass movement. A weekly bulletin scattered broadcast, an illustrated pamphlet—even motion pictures—were employed to dramatize the struggle before the workers.

All this work and its results did much to popularize the Communists as serious workers in the labor movement. The Passaic strike, which was made known to everybody was a crushing answer in itself to the accusation that the "reds" are impractical theorists, who are incapable of constructive organization work. Communist ideas found a readier acceptance from workers who saw the Communists competently promoting and organizing such a big movement.

It will be worth while for the Communist and Left wing workers to compare this mobilization with the almost total lack of it in recent struggles led by the Party and to ask the reason for the difference. The answer lies primarily in the difference in the methods and conceptions. The results of the new tactics cannot bear comparison with the results of Passaic. But are not results the best criterion by which to measure tactics?

The Passaic strike movement was conducted without any advice from the Executive Committee of the Communist International. This is mentioned not as a virtue, but as a state of affairs which the crusade against "Trotskyism" had brought about in the leading organ of the World Party. This was the biggest task our inexperienced Party had ever undertaken in the domain of mass work, and for this there was no international advice. The Comintern building was swarming with functionaries who had nothing else in the world to do but give advice and instructions, but in this case they had none. The Party had to go on its own resources. The E. C. C. I. about that time was burning up the cables with ambiguous decisions on such questions as the removal of Party headquarters from

Chicago to New York, but the Passaic strike was overlooked. Of course the Party was not entirely without help. It had the basic Lenin teaching on the united front which was not yet prohibited and this was sufficient. Lately the E. C. C. I. has remedied the neglect of Passaic and has been giving the Party much instruction on the trade union struggle. Unfortunately, it has all been bad.

Was the affiliation of the Passaic Union to the United Textile Workers a mistake in principle? This opinion is the contribution of Losovsky—after the event—and all the Party leaders, who were hot-foot for the action at the time, are wearing it like a second-hand halo. It is a not unimportant question, and one which, in the mutations of the struggle, may rise again. Therefore an answer is in order; and, for our part, in spite of Losovsky, or Zack, or even Browder, we say, no, it was not a mistake in principle. It was not even a mistake in tactics although, in the desire to keep alive the struggle which was at the point of exhaustion unnecessary concessions were made. To say that the affiliation amounted to a "betrayal" of the workers is childish nonsense that ignores all the facts. The strike was virtually at an end at the time. It had been prolonged for eight or ten months and the workers were simply worn out. If the affiliation to the U. T. W. had any effect at all it was to keep the remnants of the strike together during the negotiations until some of the mills made a sort of settlement with the organization.

The continuous proposals of the strike committee to affiliate with the U. T. W. were the weapon which isolated Hillers (the A. F. of L. agent of disruption), enabled the strike appeal to wedge its way into the conservative unions and even compelled Green to withdraw his denunciation. Without a doubt it had a strong influence in holding the strikers' ranks solid month after month and in securing the funds to sustain them.

The withdrawal of Weisbord, the strike organizer, as a condition of affiliation, was a big concession, and a dangerous precedent to establish; but in the circumstances it had little effect. The Passaic union retained its local autonomy, the local leadership remained and the influence of the Party on the subsequent decisions was the same as before. The greatest error was the opportunistic manner in which the affiliation was carried out. This was particularly noticeable in the publicity of the strike committee which began to be tainted with defeatist apologies to the labor fakers. We had occasion to make several motions in the Political Committee to correct this line but these motions were all defeated with the help of those who now, characteristically enough, bawl loudest about "betrayal" of the strike. But the errors were incidental. It will be a disaster for the Left wing if it condemns the affiliation of a Left wing union to the A. F. of L. as a mistake in principle. Lenin's teaching and international experience refute such a contention.

* * *

The Foster leaders, appeal to the Communist workers to bury themselves in "mass work" and let controversy alone. Not a few comrades, eager for activity in the class struggle, have been caught on the hook of this false formula and their effectiveness as militants is thereby negated. Mass work is not simply an exercise to be gone through, like acrobatics, for its own sake. Bolshevik mass work is an art. Communists must study its underlying principles and make these principles their own.

There can be no better preparation for effective mass work than the evaluation and study of Party experiences in the light of Lenin's basic teachings. The high light of our experience in the industrial struggle was the Passaic strike. The Party will again enormously by a study of it and by a popularization of its lessons. The most important of these is the necessity of a return to the tactics of the united front as Lenin taught them. A serious investigation of the question will convince the American Communist workers of this. Then their mass work, their sacrifices and their courage will begin to bear fruit for Communism.

Φ

\$200,000,000 Profits and—Unemployment

YOUNGSTOWN, O.—Since last October the mills in Youngstown have run two to three days a week and some are now closed down. Now we are told that the bosses of the U. S. Steel Corporation are not satisfied with the two hundred million dollars (\$200,000,000) from the workers for 1929, and expect to make more by throwing workers into the streets.

The «Right to Think»

The monstrous hypocrisy and duplicity of the Lovestone Right wingers seems to have no bounds. Its latest manifestation is expressed in an article by Will Herberg entitled "Have Communists the Right to Think?" (Revolutionary Age, Feb. 1, 1930). Herberg is very much pained because "the present intolerable regime in the Communist International... meets every sign of initiative or ideological self-reliance with immediate threats of suppression or expulsion." He is also very much worried because the bourgeois intellectual world takes advantage of this unfortunate situation to attack Communism.

It's really too bad. But, my dear Herberg, who helped to erect this "intolerable regime"? Who laid the foundation for it in the American party? How long ago is it that you were participating in this "intolerable regime" and expelling comrades for "ideological self-reliance"?

Perhaps it would not be inopportune to quote a few of your directives which you wrote in an "Outline for Speakers on Trotskyism" in March 1929. Listen to this: "Trotskyism is incompatible with membership in a Communist Party". How differently you write today! "Moreover, though membership in a Communist Party implies agreement with certain broad fundamentals it does not follow that a comrade must agree with every implication or proposition of the Marxian world-view—or out he goes!" New times, new principles!

"Why we break up Trotskyist meetings—they are demonstrations against the Soviet Union of the same type as Monarchist, socialist demonstrations." Who knows? Perhaps here we have discovered the seed of the theory of social-fascism!

No Discussion, Say Lovestone-Foster

"The struggle against Trotskyism must be a struggle against all the 'immediate issues' that the Trotskyites raise: 'no discussion', 'freedom of discussion, of opinion', 'democracy' etc. We must completely expose all these artifices." Was it for this purpose, Herberg, that you wrote your article on whether Communists have a right to think? There must be no fraternization with the Trotskyites who must be treated as counter-revolutionaries." How heavy the past weighs down on us!

Hypocrisy, always an integral element of Lovestonism, finds its highest expression in you, my dear Herberg. How much consideration for the right of Communists to think did you have when you executed that infamous dual maneuver—the N. E. C. acceptance of the Y. C. I. letter and the Polcom's statement against it? (Innocent Herberg—he was completely ignorant of the intrigues of Zam, chameleon Kaplan and Pepper.) How much regard for the right of Communists to think did you have when you concocted all the hocus-pocus about the Y. C. I. being a section of the Comintern like any other section, and therefore there was the right of one section (the American Party) to appeal against another section (the Y. C. I.)?

What contempt for the ability of Communists to think is contained in this abominable trickery to deceive the membership of the League. Yes, my dear Herberg, your duplicity was really ingenious—in accordance with the needs of the situation. Today you pursue this same line of duplicity. Only the situation has changed; therefore your line of duplicity has changed. The Communists will detect the false notes in your new crooning songs.

We have always advocated a free and open discussion of the points of view of the three tendencies in the Communist International, the Right (Bucharin-Lovestone-Brandier); the Center (Stalin-Foster, et al); and the Left (Trotsky, etc.). We proposed that this discussion be conducted within the Party in accordance with the procedure of inner-party democracy and in the spirit and practice of Lenin. You and Foster, disciples of Bucharin and Stalin, said no, and expelled us. Now the discussion of the views of the three political groups is nevertheless being conducted—but outside the bounds of the Party. This is not the best way. But the class struggle will not wait or stop at bureaucratic boundary lines, no matter who draws them. The discussion is here! Worker-Communists are exercising the right to think. With confidence, therefore, the Communist League, the Leninist-Bolsheviks, greet and prepare the future.

GEORGE RAY