

# The Labor Party and the Tasks of the Communists

By ARNE SWABECK

With ever increasing signs of deep-going changes facing the American workers, which are partly already beginning, it is of the utmost importance to recognize the present actual level of development to be able to prepare correctly for the next steps. Proceeding from that point it becomes clear that the movement toward a conscious class position will of necessity first pass some stages of rather elementary expression. Will the reformist labor party stage be one, and if so what should be the attitude of revolutionists?

The practically complete allegiance of the workers, in so far as they give any political expression, to the capitalist parties has almost become proverbial in the United States. There is no reason further to elaborate on this, except to add that particularly here parliamentary elections can only be a partial indication of working class sentiments. But in the field of economic organization there is no less backwardness shown by the vast number of workers in the manufacturing and basic industries. They are almost entirely unorganized. The Handbook of American Trade Unions claims a total membership today in all unions of 4,331,251. It was never higher at the peak figures in 1920 than 5,110,800, thus clearly informing us that the great majority of the working class have not had experience in any kind of unionism. Here we must also record the fact that within these unions there is today practically no organized left wing in existence.

## Status of the New Unions

Would it be correct to say that these unorganized workers are ready for organization but have been denied the opportunity because of the reactionary and craft ideology of the present unions? Undoubtedly that is so in the case of a good many thousands; but one must not lose sight of realities. Nowhere have the workers as yet begun in the unorganized industries to move toward elementary forms of shop organizations.

How does the case then stand with the new industrial unions sponsored by the Trade Union Unity League? Healthy growth here would naturally be a very strong indication of rapid ideological advancement of the working class. Unfortunately that is not so. These unions have remained at a very small membership and although the future holds good possibilities if correct policies are formulated for their function, the fact remains that a swing toward mass support for the new unions cannot yet be recorded.

There are other means of gauging working class development, for instance, through its press. However, compared to the capitalist dailies mounting into many millions of issues per day throughout the country the press representing labor is limited indeed. Its revolutionary section reaches only some thousands of readers. Many former labor papers of a somewhat progressive tinge have disappeared, sold out or exist as a shadow of their former strength.

## The Labor Struggles in Recent Years

Perhaps, despite all these facts, the field of actual working class struggle by way of strikes, organized or unorganized, gives a different impression of the level of development. As yet, that cannot be said to be the case. While latest figures are not available it remains a well known fact that since 1922 the number of actual strikes and workers participating in them has shown a steady decline. Only, and that is important as a trend of recent events, there has been a healthy sign of militancy displayed in such strikes, as among the textile workers in Passaic, New Bedford, Gastonia and Marion; in the ill-fated Illinois miner's strike; in the New Orleans street carmen's strike and at present in the Pittsburgh taxicab strike and the Philadelphia Aberle mill strike.

This is how matters stand just now with the working class, the actual level from which changes will proceed; and they are not the conditions of pre-war America, but of today, under a highly developed capitalist imperialism. On the other hand, we note the extremely important begin-

nings of militancy—indicative for the future.

Nevertheless, all factors considered, the most elementary steps toward a class movement of the American workers are yet to be taken. The response given in several instances to the unemployment demonstrations on March 6th, led by Communists, although not yet signifying a conscious class basis, is however, one of the definite indications of the accelerating speed of developments in this present epoch.

But proceeding from the actual level of the working class organizationally, politically and ideologically, it is hardly possible that the political reformist stage can be avoided as a definite part of future developments. In the main European industrial countries this stage has assumed its definite place, embracing almost the entire working class and is in most instances yet at its height. The forces which will initiate and furnish leadership to it in this country can already be discerned.

## Perspectives in the A. F. of L.

From the upper hierarchy of the A.F. of L. the mildest labor reformist movement has met decided opposition in the past. Its political policy is a natural reflex of its own position as part of the employers' industrial staff. This is important because of the strategic role of the organized section, even if relatively small in numbers, in the course of labor developments. But with a continued radicalization of the workers in general, the very pressure will be furnished from below which may easily strike a response among certain strata of the lower union officialdom and impel them forward to give leadership to a breakaway from the traditional two party system toward a labor party. More surely is this so since it will simultaneously afford the opportunity to ward off the masses, at least for a period, from any inclination toward the revolutionary movement, and to steer it into the safer channels of political reformism. Thus, such breakaways may become closely associated with a revolt against the policies and class collaboration practices of the A. F. of L. hierarchy. The miners' insurgent convention in Springfield, Ill., held March 10th, may be one classical illustration of just such revolts. Although not yet a breakaway, still through the working class forces it sets into motion, it can become rich in potentialities. The radicalization already manifest, the beginning of a stir within the trade unions, all speeded on by the general critical conditions, present a seeming paradox:—defensive struggles, containing explosive material, with mass demonstrations and possibly open violent outbursts, yet politically only the reformist stage of a labor party approaches. Upon closer investigation, however, it will be seen that this seeming paradox is but an exact reflex of the dialectical process.

## Some Labor Party History

It would hardly be an exaggeration to state that no issue has manifested so much confusion within the revolutionary movement during the last few years as has the labor party issue. In 1922, after a sharp struggle within the Workers Party, the correct conception of the possible growth of a labor party as an elementary expression of political development of the American workers and the duty of the Communists to function as a revolutionary factor in these developments, was adopted. But soon, digressions into adventurism and opportunism took the upper hand, making a caricature of a correct conception. The Communists, regardless of forces available and of the tempo of development, embarked upon the building of a labor party. It had its beginning in the August thesis, whose author was John Pepper. This thesis visualized each group within the labor movement—the Socialist party, the trade union group and the Communists with its own labor party. Two classes in one party, the farmer-labor party, became the accepted thing and from there it was just a short step to the formation of the Federated Farmer Labor party. As it never

became a party in reality, the tide rapidly turned toward the fiction of the La Follette alliance. This fallacy became decisively exposed only after the direct intervention of comrade Trotsky, then not yet exiled from the Comintern.

But with the intensified Centrist struggle against the Russian Communist Opposition, headed by Trotsky, the rapidly Stalinized Comintern became intoxicated with these entirely false farmer-labor practices of the American Communists. This was best expressed in the report of the Comintern political secretary, comrade Kolaroff, to the Fifth Congress, running in part as follows:

"The small farmers in the United States have organized a farmer-labor party, which becomes constantly more and more radicalized, comes closer to the Communists and is saturated with the idea of the establishment of a farmer-labor government in the United States." (?) (*Pravda*, July 6, 1924). Nothing more and nothing less.

## The Sectarian Party Policy

With the American party leadership the zig-zag still continued at dizzying speed. At the Cleveland T. U. U. L. convention last summer a most ridiculous resolution was adopted providing for the establishment of a labor party which would be against the left social democrats, the Muskettes, etc., where "no reformist elements could sneak into its ranks" (!!!). Finally the party leadership has adopted a standpoint rejecting any labor party perspective, while the Sixth Comintern Congress still adheres to one organized from below. But then, changes to the exact opposite are simple matters today under the Stalin leadership.

Of late, the labor party question has been discussed in the party press. Joseph Zack in articles in the December and January *Communist*, takes the position that reformism has already run its course in the United States through the period of the labor aristocracy organized in the A.F. of L., although not appearing here in the European clothes of a social-democratic or a labor party. He seems further to contend that while labor parties were possible in this country in the pre-monopolistic era, now, under monopoly capitalism, they are out of the question because of the sharpened class struggle. Of course, Zack has always shown aptitude in building up a series of arguments based upon seemingly perfect logic but entirely forgetting the dialectical process from which working class developments are not immune or separated.

It is somewhat different with the article of Max Bedacht in the December issue. He appears to recognize the correctness of the Party position arrived at in 1922 and subsequently approved at the Fourth Comintern congress. Remembering his sinful past as an important cog in the Lovestone-Pepper Right wing faction, and not underestimating the weakness of the flesh, he rushes in ahead of Zack and proclaims: "Me for the 'left' too". He discovers that now in the "third period" matters stand differently than way back in 1922. The "social fascist" Socialist party, the petty bourgeois liberals and the sections of the labor aristocracy bribed by imperialism, will be in the labor party too and hence he concludes:

"Under the present conditions, when the reality of the labor party does no longer represent independent political action of the working class (so!) but represents open imperialist policies under cover of an anti-imperialist firm, propaganda for a labor party can no longer represent propaganda for independent political action but becomes propaganda for an under cover instrument of imperialism.... My conclusion therefore is that it is impossible at this moment to use the labor party slogan and the labor party movement unqualifiedly in the campaign for the development of independent political action of the workers."

## Role of Labor Fakery and Socialists

But was not already in 1922 the role of the Socialist party, petty bourgeois liberals, etc., not only indicated but appearing in all its maturity; if not here, then at least elsewhere? Was it not then clearly recognized that, although Socialist party leaders, labor fakery and labor party leaders will cunningly and violently betray the workers when the latter can no longer be fooled by reformist illusions, nevertheless the separation from the bondage of the capitalist parties would mean an important step forward for the workers? Was it not recognized that in that process the Communists must move with the masses and always endeavor to extend its revolutionary influence? Of course it was, although the "third period" had not yet been invented. But despite all this well-known history, Bedacht, by theoretical magic, constructs a jumping-off board designed to make the leap over the political reformist stage in one easy jump. That is to be the "political united front". An elegant expression, whatever it may mean. He solves it very simply by basing it upon the Communist nuclei in the factories. Unfortunately, this leap will most likely never get beyond the stage of their theoretical dreams and the penalty for such false conclusions spells further party isolation from the masses.

The conclusions and formulations of the Stalin bureaucracy would be more nearly correct if we were in an immediately revolutionary period. That is just the little thing which is yet missing.

## The Labor Party—A Perspective

The correct way to put the question is that all indications and historical experiences indicate that the labor political reformist stage is quite unavoidable also in the United States, with possibilities of some form of a labor party; and that such must be our perspective. It will surely produce leaders as reactionary as those produced in any other country who will betray, and help imperialism butcher the workers, as well as endeavor to use the labor party for that very purpose. But despite these leaders, it will also help to set the masses into motion against their class enemy. The worker will suffer bitter disappointments and experience severe struggles both of a political and industrial character in the process. But with the present rapid developments, the reformist illusions will possibly be of a very short duration. Hence our conclusion is: The Communists must remain in the most intimate contact possible with the working masses in all their experiences and struggles in order to help draw the proper lessons and lead the fight against the reactionaries; to proudly unfurl the revolutionary banner of Communism through the labor reformist stage and through the labor party, from within and without; utilize all means most speedily to help elevate the American working class to its final revolutionary position.

## - CHICAGO -

### PARIS COMMUNE COMMEMORATION

Saturday, March 29th, 8 p. m.

at Fleiner's Hall, 1638 N. Halsted St.

Banquet—Recitations—Entertainment

Short talk on the Lessons of the

Paris Commune by John Mihelic

Auspices: Chicago Branch

Communist League of America (Opposition)

Admission 50c

### MILWAUKEE COMMUNISTS APPEAL WORKHOUSE SENTENCES

MILWAUKEE—(FP)—Appealing from prison sentences for alleged rioting, 37 unemployed and their Communist leaders are demanding jury trials. The riot occurred March 6th when a Hearst reporter started a counter demonstration for the sake of a sensational story. Mounted Milwaukee police rode into the crowd in the best manner of veteran Pennsylvania Cossacks.