

# The Crisis in the Needle Trades Left Wing Movement

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workers. It dances and leaps to the tunes changed each year by the Stalinist group in the movement to suit its narrow factional interests.

## A Zig-Zagging Leadership

The needle trades Left wing leadership has been most prominent in executing these zig-zags. At one moment, it seeks united fronts with Sigman or Ninfo; the next moment, it vents its spite upon Sigman by denouncing the workers whom he still deludes (or who follow him for any other reason) as "social fascists" with whom it will have nothing at all to do. At one moment, it lets golden opportunities go by without forming its own Left wing union, for fear of making the Right wing bureaucrats angry; the next moment, it seeks to make up for lost time and blunders by artificially forcing events and creating "unions" where there is no basis at all for them.

All of these changes, which occur with increasing frequency, are decided bureaucratically, behind the scenes, upon arbitrary command from above, without relation to the realities of the struggle. It is precisely because of the purely administrative nature of these changes and the fact that they do not correspond to the needs of the struggle, that each change leaves the workers more bewildered. The workers are not chessmen that can be moved about unresistingly by "master" strategists. The result of these zig-zags, therefore, is that the workers are alienated from the movement, becoming a prey to the Right wing demagogues or falling into indifference and passivity. That is what has happened particularly in the needle trades Left wing movement.

Another factor of enormous importance is the cancer of corruption (we do not refer here, necessarily, to financial corruption) and bureaucratism. For shallow-minded observers and similar Johnstones, these are accidental and personal phenomena which can be wiped out by simply denouncing them. Unfortunately, the matter is not so simple. They are the natural twin products of that very regime which the Johnstones personify and defend. Why? Because to carry out a zig-zag policy which the workers would not accept of their own accord, it is necessary to have bureaucrats who will execute orders from above even against the interests and wishes of the ranks. Not the "deviations" from Stalinist policy produce bureaucratism, but the policy itself. And bureaucratism goes hand in hand with corruption and degeneration. Bureaucratism is a synonym for mutual factional protection.

Could there be a crasser expression of this than Johnstone's article, in which (by silence) he condones in the Party leaders of the Left wing union the same deeds for which he condemns Lovestoneite leaders? The knowledge that "loyalty to the line" means a grant of automatic immunity from above, is the greatest incentive to corruption. That is the theory and practice of Stalinism, and the Left wing, which gained its strength in the fight against the bureaucracy of the Right wing must immediately purge itself of the same malady before it is rendered impotent.

There is no absolute preventive for bureaucratism; but there are some excellent guarantees against it. Workers democracy is one of them. But it does not exist in the Needle Trades Industrial Union any more than it does in the other unions controlled by the Stalinists, because its existence is incompatible with their domination.

The absence of workers democracy is notorious in the N. T. W. I. U. The rank and file worker does not feel at home in the union meetings. An atmosphere of terror has been created so that when a workers rises to make the slightest criticism he is forthwith deluged with cries of "Trotskyite, Lovestoneite, Sigmanite, scab, renegade, disrupter," and the dozens of others in the choice collection of the modern Left wing bureaucrats.

The Party bureaucrats in the unions

devote their greatest attention to keeping every post—no matter how important—tightly in their own hands. The worker, sympathetic to Communism though he may be, is made to feel that he can have no say in the work or the directing of the work unless he is a Party member—and sometimes unless he is a member of a particular Party faction! The methods and system of Party organization, already narrowed down out of all legitimate proportions, are automatically transferred into the union, which the Party rules like an imperialist dependency.

## Re-Establish Workers Democracy

The re-establishment of workers democracy in the Left wing is an imperative preliminary to any forward step. The Left wing union must be returned to the control of the membership. The Communists and their Party must become the guide, the advisor of the union and cease to be a taskmaster armed with a pistol and a lash. A continuation of the present high-handed, autocratic, brutal Party methods in the trade unions must lead inevitably to a repetition of the situation in the French C.G.T.U. (red trade unions) where a rebellion has set in not only against the Party, but (so far as some elements are concerned, at least) against Communism as such. The French situation, in which the pure "syndicalists" are profiting by the crude blunders of official Communism should be a warning to the comrades here.

Workers democracy in the needle trades Left wing is no abstract question that can be postponed for some other time; it is an urgent, unpostponable issue involving the life and death of the organization. But its achievement—let this not be lost sight of for a moment—is conditioned upon a relentless struggle against that very bureaucracy which came into existence by abolishing workers democracy. There can be no half-measures in this necessary struggle.

To make a machine function properly—and a trade union is one of the workers machines in the class struggle—one must know how and where to direct it. It is necessary to make all the parts of this machine work smoothly and in proper relation to each other—the party and the union, the leadership and the masses. The problem in the needle trades Left wing—after the attainment of this proper coordination we spoke of above (fight against bureaucracy, corruption, for workers democracy, etc., etc.)—is to know how and where to direct this machine, that is, what policies the Left wing must pursue in order to win the workers to its side.

The essence of the problem to be solved by the Left wing in this respect is, first, to win back the workers over whom the Right wing has established its control, and secondly, to organize those workers who are outside of both the Right and Left wing unions.

## Organize the Unorganized

One of the most powerful slogans, one with which the Left wing grew strong in the eyes of the workers, was the organization of the unorganized. In New York (which is typical), the MAJORITY of the needle trades workers (with the possible exceptions of the men's clothing workers) are UNORGANIZED. They are among the most exploited in the industry; they work under conditions most closely approximating the old sweat shops. It is primarily the task of the Left wing to organize these workers.

The fact of the existence of these tens of thousands of unorganized workers who do not follow the Right wing and will not be organized by it, is already sufficient answer to any tendencies in the Left wing (and there are such tendencies) to liquidate the Left wing union and filter back into the Schlesinger union to function there solely as a minority group. These tendencies to easy surrender, which are nourished by the paralysis of the present leadership and the feeling of hopelessness it creates, cannot be successfully combatted by administrative decree, or these. They must be revealed as wrong by demonstrating IN WORK AND STRUGGLE that there

remains a broad foundation for the existence and development of the Left wing union.

The difficulty of organizing these workers—depressed by previous defeats—need not be underestimated. That is true. But it is also true that they form an enormous reservoir of strength for the Left wing. They will not be organized over night, or by sensational, short-lived "campaigns". But persistent, steady activity will do it, provided that these workers are approached on the basis of a concrete struggle against their sweat-shop conditions and not on the basis of abstract slogans translated literally from the latest Molotov thesis.

They can be organized if the approach to them is based, not on the sectarian policies now dominating the Left wing, not on the virtual demand that every worker recognize the leadership of the Communist Party, but on the united front of the organized revolutionary workers with the progressive and even backward workers who want a union that really fights the bosses.

## Organize the Right Wing Workers

The policy of organizing (not talking about it on paper, but really organizing) the unorganized workers for struggle (not patches, not two day strikes for the record, but real struggle) inseparable from the job of mobilizing the workers in the Right wing union for the same purpose—a job that can be accomplished only in battle against Schlesinger and Co. and their class collaboration.

There are thousands of militant workers today registered with the Right wing who were with the Left wing yesterday. They are working in many instances under virtual check-off conditions, i. e., no dues to Schlesinger? no job in the shop! The Right wing established control over them by its connivance with the employers and with the aid of the Left wing's blockheaded blunders.

It goes without saying that the Right wing has not improved their conditions, that there is great dissatisfaction among these workers, that it is possible to organize them for a fight against the joint forces of the bosses and their labor agents. In the majority of cases these workers have not ceased to be militants and Left wingers; many of them were simply compelled to register with the Right. The policy of the Left wing union makes it impossible to win them back. Its slogan is simply: Stop paying dues to Schlesinger and join the N. T. W. I. U. Naturally, this slogan has not yet registered a single success.

Out of some stupid fetish, the official Left wing has till now refused to organize the militant elements in the Right wing union for a struggle. This policy—or rather lack of policy—must be dumped overboard. It is good for nothing at all. The Left wing must immediately proceed to organize its minorities in the Right wing union, and on the basis of the daily needs of the workers which the Schlesingers so cynically disregard, mobilize a force for the disruption of the boss-controlled union and the recruitment of the workers now in it for the Left wing. An intelligent program, fitted to the needle trades workers needs, can succeed in mobilizing them for a fight—and a fight against the bosses means a fight against Schlesinger.

The workers want unity. They want to fight when there is a possibility of success. They can see none in the narrow, academic policy of the Left wing. The plank to bridge the gap between the small organized Left wing union and the thousands in the Right wing union is the united front. More than six months ago, before Johnstone was awakened by Lozovsky's prodings and the need to find a scapegoat, we wrote in the Militant (November 1, 1929) in connection with the Right wing cloak strike:

"The Left wing can make headway, and regain the strength and influence it enjoyed in 1926 and 1927, if it knows how to approach the Right wing worker, how to work for a united front. It must challenge Schlesinger and Co. openly to un-

the divided ranks of the workers. It must work for joint action, joint committees in the shops. The Schlesingers and Dubinskys will expose themselves sufficiently in their actions during the struggle, but only if the Left wing shows its readiness to work side by side with the Right wing worker."

This proposal was rejected at that time by the Left wing; it paid for that by further losses. Long after the fact, Johnstone attempts a similar criticism, but he proposes nothing for the future. Our proposal then holds good in essence today and for the next period.

## The United Front

The official Left wing theory of the Right wing workers as "social fascists" automatically excludes the idea of a united front on a minimum platform of struggle. The theory is false; it is also good for nothing at all—except to demonstrate the theoretical poverty of Stalinism—and must be rejected. The tactic of the united front is not a cement to unite the leaders of the Left wing and the Right the Purcells and the Tomskys—that is the perversion of the united front; the united front can be a knife cutting the masses still following the Right wing loose from their misleaders. Properly utilized, this knife can become a powerful weapon in the hands of the Left wing. Lightly thrown aside, as the official Left wing has done it leaves the Right wing bureaucrats just that much greater predominance of weapons.

The superficial argument that the I. L. G. W. is a "company union" is not worth a penny. That is the attitude of Mr. William Green towards out-and-out company unions: "We will have nothing to do with them!" That is, we will not fight the bosses for the workers they dominate. The Left wing, by its argument, says: "We will not fight Schlesinger for the workers he dominates. Let them come to us or be damned eternally in hell as social fascists."

The philosophical idealist believes the world of reality to be a mere reflection of man's ideas. The third period chiefs of the needle trades Left wing (and, for that matter, the whole Party-controlled Left wing) seem to believe that the world of reality can be made to act in conformity with their abstract, pre-conceived blue-prints, drawn up without any relation to life and struggle and facts. The Left wing must learn to look at facts, disconcerting and inconvenient as they may be, and to "proceed from that which is".

No program, irrespective of its excellence, can settle the difficulties over night; the Left wing cannot so easily pay off the debts it has accumulated through a series of past blunders and defeats. Still, the serious crisis in the N. T. W. I. U., which threatens the whole future of the Left wing movement, demands a profound and free discussion—not the contemptible, bureaucratic "revelations" of the Johnstones. The Johnstones, Golds and the rest, cannot lead such a discussion, for it means their own downfall. Therefore they prohibit it. Therefore, it must be held in spite of them. And that not only in the needle trades, but in every other industrial union controlled—and undermined—by the Stalinists. That is the need of the moment. That is the job of the rank and file of the Left wing. The future of the movement is at stake.

—M. S.

The Militant invites Left wing needle trades workers to write for its columns on the situation in the union and to give their views on the problems of their movement. Articles written in any language will be translated into English and printed. The Daily Worker is the closed organ of the cynical bureaucrats—the Militant aims to become the voice of the militant rank and file.

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NEW YORK—The growing drive against Communist propaganda reached a climax in February and March when nearly 800 were arrested in unprecedented police attacks, reports the American Civil Liberties Union.