

Aftermath of Needle Trades Convention

2. Character of the Right Wing Unions

By James P. Cannon

One of the chief errors of the convention of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union—an error, like all the others, forced upon it by the Party leadership—was to regard the split in the furriers and ladies garment workers unions, and the formation of the new industrial union, as the final settlement of accounts with the reactionary leaders within the old organizations throughout the industry, including those unions which were not affected by the split. This estimation of the situation is profoundly false. The issue is not yet settled even with the unions in which the split occurred and will not be settled as long as these Right wing organizations control the majority of the organized workers in these trades. And in the field of the other unions, where there has been no split and where the new union has created no base in the shops, such an assumption is a sheer absurdity. A policy founded on this false assumption collides with facts which cannot be wished away.

The split and the formation of the new union in a section of the industry must rather be regarded as a stage in a long-drawn-out and complicated struggle. The first necessary stage was the formation of the Left wing in the old unions and its consolidation in battle. Without that the present existence of the new union would have been impossible. The Left wing is still confronted with this preliminary task in the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and in the Cap and Millinery Workers Union. It has yet to complete it in the I.L.G.W.U. and the Furriers Union. It also has the problem of uniting this activity in a comprehensive strategy with the task of strengthening the new Left union and organizing the unorganized. The goal of the Left wing is to unite the masses of needle trades workers into a single organization of the class struggle.

The goal is still some distance away, as the membership figures demonstrate with merciless logic. Under what conditions can the Left wing move in the direction of this goal. Only by demonstrating in practice that it is able to improve the material conditions of the workers in the shops. The most revolutionary program will not be accepted as a substitute for this. The workers want results in terms of bread and butter. If the Left wing union fails in this it fails in everything. The new union has the will to do this, but it is blocked by the Right unions which have the help of the bosses and the police—and, besides, have the great bulk of the organized workers in their ranks. The existence of these Right wing unions under the control of the reactionaries and traitors is not only a barrier to the new union in the organized shops; it is also a powerful force for sabotage and disruption of any serious organizing campaign of the new union among the unorganized. That is the key to its future development.

Attitude to Right Wing Unions

The question of the attitude of the revolutionaries toward the Right wing unions needs clarification. The convention of the new union under the guidance of the Party leadership, put the question on the simple basis of "either—or"; that is, FOR the new Left wing union and AGAINST the old Right wing unions throughout the entire industry. The convention program states: "The I.L.G.W.U., the A.C.W., the I.F.W.U., and the other so-called Right wing organizations are company unions in the real sense of the word... The company unions cannot be reformed, they must be destroyed." It follows with the decision: "To abandon the maintenance of the T.U.U. L. groups within the company unions." And to "call upon every needle trade worker, regardless of craft or occupation, to join the new union."

This is a false approach to the problem as well as a false estimation of the old unions. What is needed is a two-sided policy of strengthening the new union and simultaneously working within the old unions, with a single objective: to unite the workers on a broader basis under the Left wing banner. Simple solutions "either—or"—will not work out. To liquidate the new unions would mean to deprive the workers of the concentrated gains of their long struggle and paralyze their fighting power for a long time. To fail at the same time to build a strong

Left wing in the old unions would rob the new union of any possibilities of broad expansion and condemn it to sectarian impotence.

The Stalinist master-minds who can see only along a straight line, and that only as far as the end of their noses, will have none of this "complicated" strategy. And lacking reasons to justify their narrow and sectarian policy, they invent them. One of these inventions is the theory that the Right wing unions are company unions. Even if this were so it would not free the revolutionaries from the necessity of working within them as long as they embrace masses of workers. Foster explained this some years ago in his writings on company unions, and as Lenin explained before him in his account of the work of the bolsheviks in the Czarist police-controlled unions in "Left Wing Communism". But, alas, we live in the "third period", and the onetime wisdom of Foster, to say nothing of the wisdom of Lenin is a forgotten song of long ago. Stalinist education requires that we forget today everything we learned yesterday.

The Company Union Argument

The "company union" argument is a theoretical fraud invented to motivate a false policy. There is no doubt, however that many of the Left wing workers are deluded by this schematic explanation of the matter; and this delusion stands in the way of a clear comprehension of the problems and tasks of the Left wing. This circumstance justifies and necessitates a discussion of the formula which is designed to save thought and avoid a complicated struggle.

The history of the American and International labor movement shows two types of trade unions; those based on the idea of the partnership of labor and capital—"Class collaboration" unions—and those based on the class struggle. Even between these two main types the line of demarcation is not always clear. They frequently overlap each other. More than one "revolutionary" union has proved to be conservative, even reactionary, in practice and many a militant strike has been conducted by unions officially committed to a policy of class collaboration. These contradictions between practice and program arise from the fact that the trade unions are not static bodies. They have their existence in the class struggle and are constantly under its pressure and influence.

The trade unions, which are the basic and elementary organizations of the workers, reflect in a general way the stage of class development of the workers in their ranks.

The corrupt and reactionary bureaucracy exerts a certain influence, of course, in holding back the development of the union on the path of the class struggle; just as the Communists, at the other pole, are a force for its acceleration. Between these two factors of conscious pressure for opposing ends the general level of class consciousness in the masses asserts itself and determines the character of the unions in practice regardless of their predetermined program. A revolutionization of the labor movement presupposes a revolutionization of the masses and has no serious meaning without it. On the other hand, with a real development of working class radicalization, all the machinations of the bureaucrats cannot prevent the trade unions from reflecting and expressing it.

The fact that this organization expression may, and most frequently will, be realized through deep splits in the old unions and the formation of new ones—a process that has begun in the needle trades—does not alter the fundamental proposition. The very existence of the new needle trades industrial union which was first crystallized as a Left wing in the old unions, is positive proof that these unions are susceptible to the pressure of the class struggle and the agitation of the revolutionaries. It is proof that, despite the despicable fakery at their head, they are actual organizations of the workers, the natural and legitimate field for revolutionary activity.

Company unionism is a different question altogether. Company unions are organizations formed directly by the bosses and directly controlled by them. Their

officers are the bosses employees, foremen, stool-pigeons etc. They have no independent life and no independent power to enforce decisions. They have no functions except those conferred on them by the bosses. History has never yet recorded a struggle of the workers conducted under the banner of a company union; although there have been a few instances where they served as the starting point for movements of revolt against the company unions, smashing through them and forming independent unions of the workers. No worker even the most ignorant ever mistook a company union for a real union.

Class-Collaboration Unions

Can the Right wing unions in the needle trades with all the corruption and treachery of their leaders properly be classified as company unions? Certainly not, if definitions mean anything. These are quite different organizations and this fundamental difference is not abolished by the recent trend of the Right wing officials toward closer and more open partnership with the bosses. The Right wing organizations are class-collaboration unions in all the accepted meaning and implication of that term. It is quite true that the Right wing officials have introduced a new efficiency and a higher technique into the business of betraying the workers under the old theory of a partnership between labor and capital. But at bottom there is nothing new in principle. The Right wing unions in practice are more or less typical examples of the doctrine of class collaboration.

What is there about the practice of the Right wing unions that distinguishes them from the standard type of reactionary American trade unions. Is it the agreement with the bosses to compel the workers in the shop to register in the Right union. Almost every American trade union for years and even for decades has attempted to make such an agreement with the employers. Many of them are based on such contracts. The printing trades, building trades, and many other unions have such agreements. The most conspicuous illustration is the United Mine Workers. For more than twenty years this organization maintained control of the organized coal fields, and froze out such rivals as the I.W.W. and the One Big Union, through the check-off system—an arrangement whereby the mine operators collected the union dues by deducting them from the miners' wages. The program of the Left wing convention cites the check-off as one of the "characteristics of company unions". This is really laughable when it is recalled that the check-off was one of the Left wing demands in the miners union up till a short while ago; the surrender of the check-off by Lewis in the anthracite strike in 1926 was bitterly attacked by the Communist Party.

Is it co-operation of their officials with the bosses and the police to fight the militant workers which makes the Right wing unions company unions? This again is the established and traditional practice of reactionaries in the labor movement; it is such practices, among others, that stamp them as reactionaries and agents of the bosses. Lenin speaks of this in "Left Wing Communism". The traitor leaders of the German trade unions were the saviors of capitalism and the butchers of the revolutionary workers. After that Lenin wrote his pamphlet advising the German Communists to go into these unions in order to wrest the workers out of the control of these betrayers.

Is it, perhaps, the enforcement of "production standards" on the workers and the selling of the unions as agencies of efficiency that "transforms" them into company unions? This again is nothing new. Such a policy is inherent in the very idea of class collaboration unionism. The slogan of traditional trade unionism, "a fair day's wages for a fair day's work", which Marx polemicized against, is the germ of all such policies. The latter-day agents of the capitalists in the labor movement have only extended and modernized the basic ideas and practices of the conservative unionism of the past.

While in all essential and fundamental features the Right wing unions in the needle trades conform to the standard type of reactionary labor organization represented by the A. F. of L., there is no

ground for confusing them with company unions. The basic difference consists in this: The company union is a lifeless organization created by the bosses, in which no outside force is consulted and no agreement is required. The reactionary labor union, on the other hand is based on an agreement of the bosses with an outside force, namely, the unions represented by the Right wing officialdom. This relationship imparts to the union certain features never seen in a company union. These are: a formal independent life of the union organization and an independent apparatus not employed in the shop: a constitution and formal democratic procedure—business meetings, conventions, etc., without direct interference of the bosses; an independent treasury for the self-maintenance of the union; the settlement of disputes by agreement with an implied reserve weapon of compulsion on the part of the union. These are the essential features of a labor organization, a potential instrument of the class struggle and a natural field for revolutionary work.

It is quite obvious that company unions and reactionary trade unions are entirely different kinds of organizations. And this difference is not disposed of by the assertion that the Right wing unions, through their corrupt officials, also serve the bosses. This is true enough, and it must never be forgotten, but they serve the bosses in a different way than do the officials of the company unions who are directly employed by the bosses and represent no independent power. This is what we have to understand before we can draw the correct inferences regarding revolutionary tactics. To characterize the old unions in the needle trades as company unions means to play with catch-words. Those who want to think straight—and revolutionaries above all others must do this—must beware of catch-words. What we need is precise definitions of our problems and tasks. Intelligent thought requires that words have a definite meaning, although this elementary truth has not yet occurred to the phrase-mongering leaders who try to answer complicated problems with careless epithets.

If we compare the old unions in the needle trades with the standard A.F. of L. unions and such conservative independent bodies as the railroad brotherhoods we see that they all have the same characteristic features. The differences and variations between them are incidental and peculiar to the particular situation surrounding them. The important thing to see—because it is an inescapable fact—is that they are of the same basic type. Consequently, a policy of withdrawal from the reactionary unions in the needle trades, of refusing to organize a Left wing within them—on the ground that they are company unions—is, in reality, a decision to give up the fight in all the reactionary unions. Make no mistake about it. That is what the newly-baked theory of "company unionism" means.

Such proposals have been made before. In 1920 and 1921 we fought the issue out in bitter conflicts in the Party. The rise of the Left wing in the needle trades and all its great historic accomplishments would have been impossible if we had not defeated the abstentionist policy at that time and steered the Communist militants into the mass organizations controlled by the reactionaries—the same Schlessingers and Hillmans. In the early days of the Comintern a historic struggle on this question took place, the results of which were summed up at the Second World Congress of the Comintern and the First World Congress of the R.I.L.U. Thanks to the decisive leadership of Lenin and Trotsky the program of deserting the old mass unions, proposed by the German ultra-Left Opposition and sections of the British and American delegations, was rejected and the Comintern directed its course toward the masses in the reactionary unions. Without this decision the expansion of the Communist Parties of Europe as great organizations of the masses could not have taken place.

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