

# Aftermath of Needle Trades Convention

## 3. Tactics and Slogans for the Left Wing Struggle

By JAMES P. CANNON

It is high time to restate the fundamental tactics of Bolshevism on the trade union question and organize the struggle against their revision. The future of the Left wing in the American labor movement—and the future of the Communist Party—hinges on this issue. The decision of the convention of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union against the formation of a Left wing inside the old unions of the industry strengthens the grip of the reactionary leaders on these unions and thus strengthens the grip of the bosses on the workers. The nucleus of the Communist Opposition which is taking shape in the union, has for its first and most insistent duty the organization of a struggle to change this decision. Life itself will smash the decision, but the Communist militants must hasten the process in order that the least possible harm for the Left wing movement will result.

The building of the new industrial union and the organization of a fighting Left wing in the old unions are not contradictory tasks. They are two sides of the same task and are indissolubly bound together. The slogans and methods for the conduct of this two-sided struggle require explanation and discussion. This is all the more necessary since the convention failed to give a proper lead, and the document issued by the Lovestoneites at the convention is a typical product of opportunist straddling and half measures.

The policy adopted at the convention of the industrial union deals a double blow against the Left wing movement in the needle trades. On the one hand it forcibly tears away the more advanced and revolutionary elements from organizational contact with the masses of workers in the old unions. On the other hand it brings about a split in the ranks of the Left wing. In both of these consequences the policy runs counter to the basic line of Bolshevik tactics.

In the Amalgamated, which has a firm grip on the men's clothing section of the industry and where membership in the union is tied up with the question of a job, the new policy encounters insuperable difficulties from the start; and these difficulties will accumulate if any serious effort is made to enforce the policy. It will soon be demonstrated there that the workers who are willing to sacrifice their living in order to justify the stupidity of the Party are few. In the Cap and Millinery Union the new policy has already hit the rocks. The attempt to enforce the decision of the convention has split the Left wing of the New York blockers' local of this union in the middle.

The developments in the blockers' local are very instructive and they are symptomatic of what is to follow on a broader scale. In this local of 1,500 workers, constituting about fifty per cent of the workers in the trade in New York, the bloc of the Left wing and progressive forces has constituted a strong minority. The instructions to join the new Industrial Union have met with a categorical refusal on the part of all the Left wing and progressive elements except a handful of Party members. Let the Communist workers take heed of this situation in the blockers' local, it is a warning of what will happen everywhere.

### Can a Left Wing Be Organized in the Old Unions

Is it possible under the present conditions to organize a strong Left wing in the old unions of the needle trades? Now more than ever. The program which the Party leadership forced on the Industrial Union convention, in arguing against it cites the destruction of standards won in years of struggle and the failure of the Right wing officialdom to defend the interests of the workers at any point. The answer is: just because this is so, just because the conditions of the workers grow more and more intolerable and the treachery of the Right wing bureaucrats becomes more clearly manifest, the soil becomes more favorable for the organization and rapid development of a broad Left wing movement within the old unions. The bureaucrats are powerless to prevent it. The only real obstacle is the policy of the Party which has been imposed on the present Left wing forces in the industry. And—so loudly do all the circumstances cry out for such an organized movement in the old unions not even the Party can hold it back for long. If not with the official Party then without it for the time being, it must and will be organized.

The nucleus of needle trades Communists now crystallizing under our banner have the duty to take the lead in this struggle and show the way, regardless of the decisions of the Party bureaucrats to the contrary.

### The Program of Demands

The first and most important step in this direction is the formulation of a concrete program of economic demands and a vigorous agitation for them within the old unions. This is the Achilles heel of the Right wing regime and there is nothing they can do to prevent a sympathetic response to such an agitation in the ranks of the membership. The more they join hands with the bosses against the workers, the more they collaborate with them in robbing the workers of their standards the more do they create the conditions for a movement of revolt against them on the basis of our economic demands.

Every attempt on the part of the Right wing fakery to throttle this agitation will strengthen the position of the Left wing for the advocacy of another powerful slogan, the slogan of democracy in the unions. In view of the narrow, bureaucratic and arbitrary practices which have been smuggled into the administration of the new industrial union itself, it may be thought that this slogan is out of date. Nothing could be false than such an assumption. Those who hold it reckon without the workers and their deep-rooted impulse for self-governing organizations, one of the truest impulses of the advanced elements of the class. Not for nothing has been the long schooling of the needle trades workers in trade union organization: not in vain the historic struggles of the Left wing for this slogan of the rank and file. The sentiment for trade union democracy, developed and strengthened in these long struggles, is not dead. Given a sensible policy and leadership, this sentiment will reassert itself and be a source of power for the new Left wing struggle in the old unions.

Does the policy of re-opening the fight in the old unions imply any reconciliation with the traitorous and bribed officials of these unions, as the soft-headed experts of the "third period" say? Just the opposite. It means the elevation of Left wing fight from phrase-mongering futility into action which will animate the Left wing movement with a new vitality. We do not speak in favor of a tip-toe activity in the old unions by grace of the fakery, but an open, militant and ruthless war to exterminate them and all their influence. This

## First Henri Barbusse - Is Michael Gold Next?

A number of weeks ago, we printed the correspondence of comrade Pierre Naville, of Paris, on the fate of Henri Barbusse, intellectual valet of the Stalinist regime, and his literary journal of pseudo-Communist confusionism, *Monde*. We announced then that the sale of *Monde* had been prohibited in the Soviet Union (for three months now) and that the bureaucracy of the Party was getting ready to unload Barbusse. We asked then why a journal which is prohibited in the Soviet Union is recommended as good revolutionary literature to the members of the French Communist Party in particular and the workers in general.

A reply of sorts has finally appeared in the French edition of the *International Press Correspondence* (No. 46, page 544), addressed to Barbusse by the so-called "International Bureau of Revolutionary Literature" which says:

"In a period of sharpened struggle, you, comrade, edit and publish under your name a journal by which there is emptied into the masses who have confidence in you the opportunist doctrine of the calumniators and enemies of the U.S.S.R. This journal which has no proletarian line, spreads ideological confusion in the masses, extremely detrimental in the present period... Are you with us in our struggle or against us? The only reply to our question will be the radical change of the line of the paper edited by you, or the withdrawal of your name from it. An evasive reply cannot be given in the present period."

All well and good—particularly if we bear in mind that the belated critics of Citizen Barbusse are precisely the same

means to expose and denounce them before the workers on the basis of every concrete act of betrayal which they commit from day to day. It means to explain theoretically and practically their role as agents of the bosses and to imbue the workers with a deathless hatred for them. The constitution of a new Left wing movement within the old unions, uniting its struggle with that of the militants in the new industrial union, means to enter on another stage in the fight to cleanse the needle trades movement of the reactionary labor lieutenants of the employing class.

### The Tactics of the United Front

The fourth important phase of Left wing strategy is the revival of the tactics of the united front and the slogan of trade union unity. The slogan of unity has power to move the masses. It corresponds to the necessities of their struggle and to their own inmost convictions, born of tragic experience in splits and defeats. The Left wing must raise again the slogan of unity in the new union and in the old ones. It must explain to the workers, over and over again that it is the Right wing reactionaries who bring division and split into the labor movement and that it is the Left wing which fights for unity. The Left wing must prove this in its daily policy because words alone are not enough; it is deeds which convince. The Left wing in the needle trades took shape, grew and became consolidated in battle under the slogan of unity. The abandonment of the slogan has been accompanied by a weakened organization and a dwindling influence. The revival of the slogan now is necessary to turn the helm and change the course toward new victories for the Left wing and for the masses of the workers.

A general phrase about unity means nothing. What is required is a precise formulation for the concrete circumstances. The Party's talk about unity is good for nothing because it goes hand in hand with a policy of split. The workers are not as dumb as the bureaucrats think and they are not so easily fooled by words which are contradicted by deeds. The slogan put forth by the Lovestoneite faction—a typical production of opportunist generality and evasion—is no better. This shoddy crew, trying to capitalize the sentiment for unity in the old unions and fearing to offend the sectarian patriotism of the members of the new union, has issued the slogan: "Fight for one industrial union in the industry!" What does that mean? Like all the slogans of the opportunists it means anything you like. As to how it is to be realized, how it is to be put concretely in

people who lauded him to the skies, started his paper *Monde*, and set it up as the model for all other "proletarian literary" journals to follow.

As is well known, the American prototype of *Monde* is the *New Masses*, under the ideological aegis of Michael Gold, Walt Carmon, Earl Browder and other prominent proletarian poets. The *New Masses* continues to publish advertisements for *Monde*, which—we repeat—has been prohibited in the U.S.S.R. The same *New Masses* fearfully rejects advertisements for the *Militant* or for any of comrade Trotsky's books. Like *Monde*, columns are open to every confusionist and dilletante hanging on to the fringes of the revolutionary movement, but not to the Left wing of that movement. They fear to anger the Stalinist commissar whose literary footmen they are, and the millionaire banker, Otto H. Kahn, patron of "proletarian art" and of Citizen Gold, the pallid devourer of Trotsky and Oppositionists.

M. Barbusse played the same role for a while. The Stalinists have now rid themselves of that embarrassing baggage. Were Gold one-tenth the sage in politics he imagines himself, he ought to be able to read handwriting when it is written on the wall.

Remember the days of "prosperity" when labor banking, was all the rage among the "constructive statesmen of labor?" Yet another "labor bank" has had to close its doors—this time the largest of its kind in the country (the Botheholds of Railway Clerks National Bank), as a result of the \$1,000,000 kitting operations.

the new union and in the old unions—this is left to guess work and interpretation.

### The Slogan of Unity

The Opposition Communists in the needle trades cannot trifle with double-meaning slogans. Their aim is to clarify the issues, not to attract the workers with catch-words. They are duty bound to act in the spirit of Lenin, who said: "Argue about tactics but give clear slogans!" Therefore they must formulate the slogan of unity with such precision that there can be no misunderstanding about it. The Stalinists propose to achieve "unity" by having the 175,000 workers in the Right wing unions withdraw from them individually and join the six or seven thousand members in the new industrial union. This is absurd. The Lovestoneites formulate the slogan so that it can be interpreted one way when they are under the attacks of the Stalinists in the new union and the opposite way when they are under the attack of the officials in the old unions. This is misleading; this is playing with issues according to the time-honored practice of these unprincipled opportunists.

In our opinion the slogan of unity should be formulated as follows: "Unite the old unions with the new industrial union into a single organization for the entire industry!" The slogan, thus formulated, should be raised in direct connection with the other slogans mentioned above regarding the fight for economic demands, trade union democracy and the elimination of the Right wing leaders. It should be issued by the new industrial union and by the organized Left wing in the old unions in precisely the same way and would be the most important means of uniting their struggles into one, along the front of the entire industry. The two sections of the Left wing, working in different fields of organization, would thereby be bound together into a single ideological force. From this organizational coordination of the joint struggle would follow,

On this basis both sections of the Left wing would bound forward in the confidence of the workers, and each section—the new union in the sphere of the unorganized and the organized Left wing in the old unions—would expand its organization. There is no contradiction in such a perspective. The two lines of activity supplement and strengthen each other. The existence of the new union as a growing force would constitute a standing threat to the bureaucrats of the Right wing unions against mass expulsions. In fear of the new union they will be compelled to hesitate and temporize with a Left wing in their own organizations, and allow it a certain room for development. On the other hand, a desperate fear of the movement within the Right wing unions, driving the officials to mass expulsions and splits again would bring new forces to swell the ranks of the industrial union, not handfuls of Communists as will be the case under the present policy but masses of workers who would impart to the new union the character of a mass organization.

### The Question of "Reforming" the Old Unions

Against our proposals and perspective there remains a question of last resort for the Stalinist tacticians: "Is it possible to reform the old unions and transform them into genuine organs of the class struggle?" The Stalinists have answered this question in the negative and thereby disposed of it as far as they are concerned. As for us this schematic formulation has no meaning. We do not advise the Left wing workers to waste their time in speculation as to the possibilities of a "legal" conquest of the apparatus of the old unions. Experience in the needle trades struggle has already provided a certain answer on this point. When we speak of a conquest of the old unions we do not think in terms of the offices, the buildings and the banks. We think of the 175,000 workers in these unions and we say they can and they will be won for the revolutionary banner. When we proclaim the slogan of uniting the old unions with the new industrial union in a single organization we do not promise that this unity will be legally confirmed by the reactionary leaders with a voluntary abdication. But our slogan of unity is nevertheless a sincere one and it is put forward with confidence that it will be realized. With a correct policy and a competent leadership the Left wing will win over the masses and unite them—if not all, then the great majority—into one union. Let the reactionaries think of the unions in terms of contracts with the bosses, offices, buildings and banks. Let us think of the unions in terms of the workers within them. This conception will guide us toward the slogan and tactics of victory.