

The Question of Trade Union Unity

By LEON TROTSKY

The question of the unity of the workers' organizations is not subject to a single solution suitable for all forms of organization and for all conditions.

The question resolves itself most categorically for the party. Its complete independence is the elementary condition of revolutionary action. But even this principle does not give in advance a ready-made reply to the questions: when and under what conditions must the split, or, on the contrary, the unity be made with a neighboring political current? Such questions are settled each time on the basis of a concrete analysis of the tendencies and the political conditions. The highest criterion, in any case, remains the necessity for the vanguard of the organized proletariat, the party, to preserve its complete independence and its autonomy on the basis of a distinct program of action.

But precisely such a solution of the question with regard to the party not only admits, but as a general rule, renders indispensable a quite different attitude with regard to the question of the unity of other mass organizations of the working class: trade unions, cooperatives, Soviets.

Each one of these organizations has its own tasks and methods of work, and within certain limits, independent ones. For the Communist party, all these organizations are first of all the arena of the revolutionary education of broad workers' sections and of the recruitment of the advanced workers. The larger the mass in the given organization the greater are the possibilities it offers the revolutionary vanguard. That is why, as a rule, it is not the Communist wing but the reformist wing which takes the initiative to split the mass organizations.

THE BOLSHEVIKS AND THE TRADE UNIONS

It is enough to contrast the conduct of the Bolsheviks in 1917 to that of the British trade unions in recent years. The Bolsheviks not only remained in the same trade unions with the Mensheviks, but in certain trade unions they tolerated a Menshevik leadership, even after the October revolution, although the Bolsheviks had the overwhelming majority in the Soviets. The British trade unions, on the contrary, upon the initiative of the Laborites, not only drive the Communists out of the Labor party but, so far as it is possible, out of the trade unions as well.

In France, the split in the trade unions was also the consequence of the initiative of the reformists, and it is no accident that the revolutionary trade union organization, compelled to lead an independent existence, adopted the name of unitary [the name of the Left wing trade union center in France is "Unitary General Confederation of Labor". Ed.]

Do we demand today that the Communists quit the ranks of the General Confederation of Labor [the Right wing trade union center]? Not at all. On the contrary: the revolutionary wing within the Confederation of Jouhaux must be strengthened. But by that alone we show that the splitting of the trade union organization is in no case a question of principle for us. All these ultra-Leftist objections in principle that may be formulated against trade union unity apply first of all to the participation of Communists in the G.C. of L. Yet every revolutionist who has not lost touch with reality must recognize that the creation of Communist fractions in the reformist trade unions is an extremely important task. One of the tasks of these fractions must be the defense of the U. G. C. of L. before the members of the reformist trade unions. This cannot be accomplished except by showing that the Communists do not want the splitting of the trade unions but, on the contrary, that they are ready at any moment to re-establish trade union unity.

If one admits for an instant that the splitting of the trade unions is imposed by the duty of the Communists to oppose a revolutionary policy to that of the reformists, then one cannot limit himself to France alone: One must demand that the Communists, regardless of the relationship of forces, break with the reformist trade unions and also constitute their own trade unions in Germany, in England, in the United States, etc. In certain countries, the Communist parties have actually taken this road. In specific cases, the reformists really leave no other way out. In other cases, the Communists commit an obvious mistake by falling into the provocations of the reformists. But up to now, the Communists have never and nowhere motivated the splitting of the trade unions by the inadmissibility in principle of working with the reformists in the organizations of the proletarian masses.

Without stopping to deal with the cooperative organizations, the experiences with which will add nothing essential to what has been said above, we will take as an example the Soviets. This organization arises in one of the most revolutionary periods, when all problems are put with the keenness of a blade. Can one, however, imagine even for a moment the creation of Communist Soviets as a counterpoise to social democratic Soviets? This would mean to kill the very idea of the Soviets. At the beginning of 1917, the Bolsheviks remained within the Soviets as an insignificant minority. For months—and in a period when months counted for years, if not for decades—they tolerated a conciliatory majority in the Soviets, even though they already represented an overwhelming majority in the factory committees. Finally, even after the conquest of power, the Bolsheviks tolerated the Mensheviks within the Soviets while these latter represented a certain part of the working class. It was only when the Mensheviks had completely compromised and isolated themselves, by being transformed into a clique, that the Soviets threw them out of their midst.

In Spain, where in the near future the slogan of Soviets could already be put practically on the order of the day, the very creation of Soviets (juntas), provided there is an energetic and bold initiative of the Communists, is not to be conceived of otherwise than by way of a technical organizational agreement with the trade unions and the socialists on the method and the intervals of the election of workers' deputies. To advance, under these conditions, the idea of the inadmissibility of work with the reformists in the mass organizations would be one of the most disastrous forms of sectarianism.

REFORMISM AND THE WORKING CLASS

How then is such an attitude on our part towards the proletarian organizations led by the reformists to be reconciled with our evaluation of reformism as the Left wing of the imperialist bourgeoisie. This contradiction is not a formal but a dialectical one, that is to say, one that flows from the very course of the class struggle. A considerable part of the working class (its majority in a number of countries) rejects our evaluation of reformism: in other countries, it has not as yet even approached this question. The whole problem consists precisely of leading these masses to revolutionary conclusions on the basis of our common experiences with them. We say to the non-Communist and to the anti-Communist workers: "Today you still believe in the reformists leaders whom we consider to be traitors. We cannot and we do not wish to impose our point of view upon you by force. We want to convince you. Let us then endeavor to fight together and to examine the methods and the results of these fights." This means: full freedom of groupings within the united trade unions where trade union discipline exists for all.

No other principled position can be proposed.

The Executive Committee of the Ligue [Left Opposition in France] is at present correctly giving first place to the question of the united front. This is the only way that one can prevent the reformists, and above all their Left wing agents, the Monattists, from opposing to the practical tasks of the class struggle the formal slogan of unity. Vassart*, as a counter-balance to the sterile official line, has put forward the idea of the united front with the local trade union organizations. This way of posing the question is right in the sense that during local strikes it is primarily a question of working with local trade unions and specific federations. It is equally true that the lower links of the reformist apparatus are more sensitive to the pressure of the workers. But it would be wrong to make any kind of principle difference between agreements with the local opportunists and those with their chiefs. Everything depends upon the conditions of the moment, upon the strength of the pressure of the masses, and upon the char-

* One of the Communist party leaders in the red trade unions who, after having been one of the most prominent banner-bearers of the "third period" policy of the Comintern and the French party, has fallen out over questions of policy with the party leadership. His course is sometimes referred to by the official party leaders, in their polemics against him, as "semi-Trotskyist". Ed.

acter of the tasks which rest on the order of the day.

It is self-understood that we in no case put the agreement with the reformists, whether locally or centrally, as the indispensable and preliminary condition for the struggle in each specific case. We do not orientate ourselves according to the reformists but according to the objective circumstances and the state of mind of the masses. The same applies to the character of the demands put forward. It would be fatal for us to engage ourselves in advance to accept the united front according to the conditions of the reformists, that is, upon the basis of minimal demands. The working masses will not rise for the struggle in the name of demands that would seem fantastic to them. But on the other hand, should the demands be too restricted in advance, then the workers may say to themselves: "The game is not worth the candle."

The task does not consist of each time proposing the united front formally to the reformists, but of imposing conditions upon them which correspond as best as possible to the situation. All this demands an active and maneuverist strategy. In any case, it is incontestable that it is particularly and only in this way that the U. G. C. of L. can moderate, up to a certain point, the consequences of the division of the masses into the trade union organizations, that it can throw the responsibility for the split upon those on whom it really belongs, and put forward its own positions of struggle.

The singularity of the situation in France presents the fact that two trade union organizations have been existing there separately for many years. In the face of the ebb of the movement in recent years, people have accustomed themselves to the split, very often it has simply been forgotten. However, one could foresee that the revival in the ranks of the working class would inevitably revive the slogan of the unity of the trade union organizations. If one takes into account that more than nine-tenths of the French proletariat is outside of the trade unions, it becomes clear that with this revival being accentuated, the pressure of the unorganized will increase. The slogan of unity is nothing but one of the first consequences of this pressure. With a correct policy, this pressure should be favorable to the Communist party and the U. G. C. of L.

If, for the next period, an active policy of the united front is the principal method of the trade union strategy of the French Communists, it would nevertheless be a thorough mistake to oppose the policy of the united front to that of the unity of the trade union organizations.

THE PROBLEM OF THE UNITED FRONT

It is entirely incontestable that the unity of the working class can only be realized on a revolutionary basis. The policy of the united front is one of the means of liberating the workers from reformist influence and even in the last analysis, towards the genuine unity of the working class. We must constantly explain this Marxian truth to the advanced workers. But a historical perspective, even the most correct one, cannot replace the living experience of the masses. The party is the vanguard, but in its work, especially in its trade union work, it must be able to lean towards the rearguard. It must, in fact, show the workers—once, twice and even ten times if necessary—that it is ready at any moment at all to help them reconstitute the unity of the trade union organizations. And in this field, we remain faithful to the essential principles of Marxian strategy: the combining of the struggle for reforms with the struggle for the revolution.

What is the attitude today of the two trade union confederations towards unity? To the broad circles of the workers, it must appear entirely identical. In truth, the administrative strata of the two organizations have declared that the unification can only be conceived of "from below" on the basis of the principles of the given organization. By covering itself with the slogan of unity from below, borrowed from the U. G. C. of L., the reformist confederation exploits the forgetfulness of the working class and the ignorance of the younger generation which knows nothing of the splitting work of Jouhaux, Dumoulin and Co. At the same time, the Monattists assist Jouhaux by substituting for the fighting tasks of the labor movement the single slogan of trade union unity. As honest courtiers, they direct all their efforts against the U. G. C. of L. in order to detach from it the great-

est possible number of trade unions, to group them around themselves and then to enter upon negotiations on an equal footing with the reformist confederation.

As far as I am able to judge here from the material I have, Vassart has expressed himself for the Communists themselves to put forward the slogan of a unification congress of the two trade union confederations. This proposal was categorically rejected; as for its author, he was accused of having gone over to Monatte's position. Lacking data, I am unable to express myself thoroughly on this discussion. But I consider that the French Communists have no reason to abandon the slogan of a fusion congress. On the contrary.

The Monattists say: "The first are splitters as well as the second. We alone are for unity. Workers, support us". The reformists reply: "As for us, we are for unity from below", that is, "we" will generously permit the workers to rejoin our organization. What must the revolutionary confederation say on this subject? "It is not for nothing that we call ourselves the unitary confederation. We are ready to realize the unity of the trade union organization even today. But for that the workers have no need at all of suspicious courtiers who have no trade union organization behind them and who feed upon splits like maggots on a festering wound. We propose to prepare and convene after a definite period a fusion congress on the basis of trade union democracy."

This manner of posing the question would have immediately cut the ground from under the feet of the Monattists, who are a completely sterile political grouping, but capable of bringing a great confusion into the ranks of the proletariat. But will not this liquidation of the group of courtiers cost us too dearly? It will be objected that in case the reformists should consent to a unity congress, the Communists would be in the minority there and the U. G. C. of L. would have to yield its place to the G. C. of L.

Such a consideration can only appear persuasive to a Left trade union bureaucrat who is fighting for his "independence", while losing sight of the perspectives and tasks of the movement as a whole. The unity of the two trade union organizations, even if the revolutionary wing remains in the minority for a time, would show itself in a short period of time to be favorable precisely to Communism and only to Communism. The unity of the confederations would bring in its train a great influx of new members. Thanks to this, the influence of the crisis would be reflected within the trade unions in a more profound and more decisive fashion. The Left wing would be able, within the rising new wave, to begin a decisive struggle for the conquest of the united confederation. To prefer a sure majority in a narrow and isolated trade union confederation to oppositional work in a broad and real mass organization, can be done only by sectarians or officials but not by proletarian revolutionists.

For a thinking Marxist, it is quite evident that one of the reasons which contributed to the monstrous mistakes of the leadership of the U. G. C. of L. was due to a situation where people like Monmousseau, Semard and others, without theoretical preparation or revolutionary experience, immediately proclaimed themselves the "masters" of an independent organization and consequently had the possibility of experimenting with it under the orders of Losovsky, Manuilsky and Co. It is incontestable that if the reformists had not at one time arrived at the splitting of the confederation, Monmousseau and Co. would have had to reckon with broader masses. This fact alone would have disciplined their bureaucratic adventurism. That is why the advantages of unity would have been immeasurably greater at present than the disadvantages. If, within the unified confederation embracing about a million workers, the revolutionary wing remains in the minority for a year or two, these two years would be undoubtedly more fruitful for the education not only of the Communist trade unionists, but for the whole party, than five years of "independent" zig-zags in a U. G. C. of L. growing constantly weaker.

No, it is not we, but the reformists, who should fear trade union unity. If they consent to a unity congress—not in words but in fact—that would create the possibility of bringing the labor movement in France out of the blind alley. But that is just why the reformists will not consent to it.

The conditions of the crisis are creating the greatest difficulties for the reformists, primarily in the trade union field. That is why they find it so necessary to take shelter behind their Left flank; it is

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