

# EDITORIAL NOTES

## “UNDER RANK AND FILE LEADERSHIP”

One of the demands in the program of the lefts, who were elected to the convention of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, was for “a real strike under rank and file leadership”. This slogan does not appear here for the first time. It did not originate with the workers who stood as the candidates of the Left in the International elections, and they should not be blamed for it. There is no doubt that this anti-leadership slogan was imposed upon them by their own “leaders”, the Stalinists, whose “rank and file” ballyhoo is intended for the deception of others and by no means for their own guidance in relation to their rank and file.

In their steadily losing battle of recent times with the traitorous leaders of the Right wing unions, the demoralized officials of Stalinism have been trying to outwit their opponents and to sneak into the leadership of the workers without their knowledge. This is the grand “strategy” which motivates the demagogic appeal for the leadership of the “rank and file”. The sad results which these unworthy maneuvers have brought, not the least of which has been the disorientation of the Communist workers in the simplest and most elementary questions, justify a discussion of this ridiculous slogan from the standpoint of the A B C of Marxism.

The first thing which must strike the observant worker, and which in part accounts for the miserable failure of the slogan about rank and file leadership, is the howling inconsistency of its authors. On the one side they stand at the head of the party by virtue of appointment and rule it with the most bureaucratic arbitrariness. If one is looking for an example of “the leadership of the rank and file” he will never find the merest trace of it in the Stalinized party. The rank and file Communist who would venture to assert the modest right to say what he thinks in criticism of the leadership, to say nothing of the advocacy of the slogan which he propagates in the unions under party instruction, would soon be handed his passports. This is what has happened to many, and the workers in the unions know it. Integrity, common sense and a decent respect for ordinary human intelligence all argue against this sordid attempt to fool the workers with an idea that is flatly contradicted in the practices of the Amters and all the other Fosters.

But hypocrisy and dishonesty are prime ingredients of Stalinism; and, in addition, contempt for the workers. Abusing the faith of the conscious proletariat in the Russian revolution and the Comintern, they imagine they can sanctify anything by mere command. This is what misleads them into such self-contradictory policies in relation to the general labor movement. Ruling within the limited sphere of the party by decree, they forget that in order to influence the non-Communist masses it is necessary to convince them. And since the

masses take nothing on faith, but test everything out in life and learn from their experience, the slogans of the party which do not correspond to reality are unavailing. Thus it happens that such manifest absurdities as the “leadership of the rank and file” leave the masses untouched, and only succeed in deceiving and disorientating the Communist workers. In this case simple questions, long ago settled in the camp of the Marxists.

## LENIN ON LEADERS AND MASSES

Twelve years ago Lenin wrote a pamphlet for the purpose of clearing up some misconceptions in the newly-formed Communist parties. One of these misconceptions was the prejudice, derived from syndicalism, regarding leaders and masses. Replying to the arguments of those “Leftists” in the German party who contrasted the one to the other he remarked: “What old and well-known rubbish! What ‘left’ childishness!” The simple explanations and ironical comments of the great teacher, regarding the masses and the leaders and the inter-relationships between them, apply so pertinently to the present aberration of the American Stalinists on the subject of “rank and file leadership” that a few quotations will be in order.

“One notices the superficial and incoherent use of the now ‘fashionable’ terms, ‘masses’ and ‘leaders’. People have heard much and have conned by rote all the frivolous attacks on ‘leaders’—contrasting them with the ‘masses’—but failed to grasp the application and the inner meaning of these words.”

“To a Russian Bolshevik . . . all talk of ‘from above’ or ‘from below’, the ‘dictatorship of leaders’ or ‘the dictatorship of the masses’ cannot but appear as childish nonsense. It is something like discussing whether the left leg or the right arm is more useful to a man.”

“People bend every effort to elaborate something extraordinary, and in their zeal to be intellectual they become ridiculous. It is common knowledge . . . that the classes are usually and in most cases led by political parties, at least in modern civilized countries; that political parties, as a general rule, are led by more or less stable groups of the more influential, authoritative experienced members, elected to the most responsible positions, and called leaders. All this is elementary. It is simple and plain. Why then all this rigamarole, this new Volapuk?”

These citations are taken from *The Infantile Sickness of “Left” Communism*. Have the new members of the party ever seen this pamphlet, and have the old members forgotten it? These teachings, like all the fundamental doctrines elaborated by the Comintern under Lenin, have been declared out of date; they are buried under the filth and confusion of the Stalin regime. The Communist worker who wants to find his way back to the Lenin path might well begin with a study, or a reexamination, of the “Infantile Sickness”.

After that he would never be able to go around shouting such absurdities as “the leadership of the rank and file”. He would not be able even to listen to such an instruction from his own “leaders” without laughing under the table.

## THE ROLE OF THE CONSCIOUS WORKERS

The chatter about “rank and file leadership” is a disgrace for Communists. Such horseplay can very well be left to the confusionists of syndicalism who object to the idea of a workers’ political party on the ground that the masses need no leaders. This demoralizing nonsense only hampers the organization of the working class and thus serves the bourgeoisie. The mission of the Communists is to educate the workers, not to muddle and confuse them; to aspire, frankly, to lead them in their struggle, not to trail behind them and cater to ignorance and prejudice with demagogic slogans.

The working class under capitalism, is not and cannot be a homogeneous body. The enormous pressure of the ruling class ideology presses heavily upon it. Bourgeois ideas, disseminated through the press, the schools, the church, the movies, the political parties, and in other ways, demoralize and corrupt the thoughts of the workers. Besides that, the working class under capitalism is divided into various economic categories, with different standards of living and, to a certain extent, different immediate interests. The upper stratum, the aristocracy of labor, which is the most conservative, and at the same time the best organized, becomes a means of strengthening bourgeois influences over the class. The labor bureaucrats, with their high salaries and petty-bourgeois standards of life, act as the agents of capital in the labor movement.

As a result of all this, it is possible, under capitalism, only for a minority of the working class to free itself from bourgeois influences and ideas and to understand the historical class position of the proletariat. These are the conscious workers, the vanguard of the class. In order to influence the class in its own interest most effectively it is necessary for these conscious workers to organize themselves and to fight unitedly against the domination of the capitalists and their agents in the labor movement. From this arises the Marxist idea of the centralized workers’ party. It is the first letter of the Marxist alphabet on the question of working class organization.

This principle of leadership, by the most conscious and resolute elements, applies to strikes and other daily struggles as well as to the class struggle as a whole. The agitation for “the leadership of the rank and file” negates this principle and sows confusion. By this it only makes the leadership of the reactionary agents of the capitalists more secure. This harmful and anti-Marxist slogan should be cast aside. Instead of it, the Communist workers in the unions, as in every other field of the class struggle, should frankly contrast their policy and their leadership to the policy and the leadership of the labor lieutenants of capital. This is the only way to teach the workers and help them in their struggle. There is no roundabout way.

—J. P. C.

# The Negro and the Class Struggle

The National Committee of the Communist League of America (Opposition), by direction of the National Conference, appointed a commission to assemble material on the Negro question in America and to open a discussion in the League. The following article by comrade Oehler, a member of the commission, is a contribution to the discussion and presents his personal views. —Ed.

In modern Europe, where capitalism has long ago had its decisive battles with feudalism, there still linger remnants of the past, feudal carry-overs complicating the solution of the proletariat’s problems. This complication does not confront the workers of America, but in its place we have a variety of more conflicting inheritances. One of these was the carry-over of chattel slavery, a more backward system which gained, supremacy over attempted feudalist inroads in new America by its economic advantages in the south for large scale agriculture production. The race form of chattel slavery in America gave impetus to this development.

The period when economic systems were gaining a foothold in new America cannot be separated from the class struggles in Europe at that time. The discovery of America which gave the feudal kingdoms greater land rights only accelerated the internal contradictions between the feudal land property relations and the developing bourgeois property relations. The commercial system of Europe was on the upgrade and the race for America reflected this. The discovery of America accelerated bourgeois development in Europe and logically expressed its growth in the colonies.

In Europe, feudalism ruled by the monopoly of land through the feudal estates and the Catholic church and by hindering the developing handicraft system, keeping it part of the feudal hand-tool production. Free land in America played havoc with feudal relations, not just because there was free land, but primarily because with this free land developed the bourgeois property relations. Bourgeois relations are made difficult by free land, but the presence of large tracts of usable free land in a new country smashes all feudal attempts at stability when capitalism moves in at the same time.

## The Problem of Labor Power

Labor power and its control was the burning problem of the rulers of the colonies, not only its scarcity but also its control once obtained. Wage workers would soon disappear as free farmers, hunters and trappers. The white slaves and indentured slaves from Europe enabled the merchant and commercial classes to retain a sufficient supply of cheap labor power, but this could only be kept up by a constant influx from Europe. The land to the west was an escape for this labor supply. At the same time, however, this resulted in developing bourgeois agriculture relations in the northern part of the colonies.

In Europe, where capitalism was already at work appropriating those who

had escaped feudalism through the handicraft system or by free peasant farming, and turning them into an army of propertyless wage slaves, there was no further escape. Either work as wage slaves, starve to death, or be killed or imprisoned as beggars and thieves—these were the alternatives. In America the escape to the west was still open. But this “escape” laid the basis for the further development and strengthening of bourgeois domination in America.

In the south conditions were different. The kinds of crops and the climatic conditions called for a different form. The crops demanded large scale agriculture production, and, capitalist agriculture relations were yet in their infancy. Feudalism could answer this request but, it could not furnish Serfs tied to the land and accustomed to the hot climate, when livelihood could be obtained by hunting and fishing, and trapping and free land for farming. The only suitable alternative, that rising bourgeois relations could tolerate was chattel slavery; bringing in large scale agriculture production, labor power bound in slavery, suitable for the climate. It was proven that the Indian could not serve this purpose. The white man from Europe had too easy an escape, even if it were possible to brand him as a chattel slave. The Negro race answered the need. Indentured slavery was the closest form to chattel slavery possible for the white man of Europe. It sufficed for the recruitment of a supply of labor in the north, but was not suitable for cotton and tobacco production in the south.

The traffic in Negro slaves was just as profitable as the traffic in indentured slaves. The chattel slave was more profitable for the south under the conditions. But in the latter period of Slavery in America the bourgeois relation had far outstripped the other forces and had shown that the wage slave was by far the most profitable for the master class. The conflict of these two antagonistic systems reached its climax in the Civil War. The forceful expropriation of the chattel masters’ property in the form of the slaves put an end to the most dangerous internal enemy of the bourgeois system. However, this did not remove all the obstacles and give a free hand for capitalist penetration. The carry-over was as heavy as a mountain, hindering all speedy solutions.

The expropriation of the chattel masters of their property in the slaves, opened up new avenues for capitalist development and new markets for penetration. The dictatorship which the capitalists set up in the south after the Civil War soon reduced the chattel masters to submission. The dictatorship was becoming a boomerang. The former slave was taking his liberty seriously in an increasing degree. The exploiters of the wage slaves were not long in learning they had a hundred times more in common with the former chattel masters than with the former slaves. The freedom taken by the slaves had to be checked; the dictatorship against the chattel masters was modified when their resistance was broken.

en, when they came to terms—the terms of the northern capitalists. From them on the capitalist supremacy took on a form of democracy for the white rulers of the south, and a new form of dictatorship against the Negro masses who were driven into worse slavery than before.

## The New Role of the Negro

The freeing of the Negro from chattel slavery opened the door to a tremendous supply of cheap labor for the American capitalist. In fact the supply was too great for developing capitalism to absorb. However, it remained in reserve, ever ready to be used as expansion would warrant. Although capitalist development in America was fairly fast, the influx of European wage slaves, already trained, kept in check the rapid transformation of former chattel slaves into wage slaves. The slaves’ “freedom” turned out to be a bourgeois joke. The former slave found himself, free from his former master’s obligation to feed, clothe and shelter him, and keep him well as property, but not free from the economic exploitation and political domination of the capitalists and plantation owners. Left “free”, without economic means for a livelihood (land and tools), the Negro was free to starve to death, to submit to his former master in worse economic subjection than before, or to become a wage slave, providing he could find an employer. The “free” Negro, without land or tools, had only one road to travel as a class and race—to submit to the new forms of exploitation, since conditions were not ripe for a successful revolution to free themselves from their white masters and obtain the land and tools of production for themselves. As a race they adjusted themselves to the new condition—unassimilated as wage slave; not held as chattel slaves; reflecting the old and looking at the new, but representing neither. They started the process by seeking out an existence on the land and as servants of the white rulers; part slave, part serf and part wage slave.

At the time of the transformation only the Marxists realized the historic significance of the “freeing” of the chattel slaves. The history of American labor cannot be written properly unless this current is traced back and properly connected with the development of the white and negro proletariat and their allies in the coming revolution.

Westward expansion, internal northern American development and colonial expansion could tolerate concessions to the white rulers of the south in return for their political support as plantation owners. Rule the Negroes in your own state as you like so long as you support your political hegemony, said the northern capitalist; and besides you can make more profits by your support than by resistance. And just as the freedom of the American revolution amounted to so many words and pieces of paper for the workers and farmers, so much did the freedom of the Civil War amount to for the Negro masses.

—HUGO OEHLER.

(To be continued)

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# BUREAUCRATIC ULTIMATISM

by LEON TROTSKY

(Continued from last issue)

Instead of aiding the social democratic workers to find their way through experience, the C. E. C. of the Communist party abets the leaders of the social democracy against the workers. The Welles and the Hilferdings are enabled to screen with flying colors their own unwillingness to fight, their dread of fighting, their inability to fight by citing the aversion of the Communist party for participating in a common struggle. The stubborn, doltish and insensate rejection by the Communist party of the policies of the United Front provides the social democracy, under the present conditions, with its most important political weapon. This is just the reason why the social democracy—with the parasitism inherent in its nature—snaps up our criticism of the ultimatic policies of Stalin-Thaelmann.

The official leaders of the Comintern are now expatiating with profound demeanor upon the need to elevate the theoretical level of the party and to study “the history of Bolshevism”. Actually “the level” is falling constantly, the lessons of Bolshevism are forgotten, distorted and trampled under foot. In the meantime, it is by no means difficult to find in the history of the Russian party the precursor of the present policy of the German C. E. C.: he is none other than the deceased Bogdanov the founder of ultimatism or of “the up-and-outers” (Otzovists). As far back as 1905 he deemed it impossible for the Bolsheviks to participate in the Petrograd Soviet, unless the Soviet recognized beforehand the leadership of the Social Democrats. Under Bogdanov’s influence, the Petrograd Bureau of the C. E. C. (Bolsheviks) passed a resolution in October 1905: to submit before the Petrograd Soviet the demand that it recognize the leadership of the party; and in event of refusal—to walk out of the Soviet. Krassikov, a young lawyer, in those days a member of the C. E. C. (Bolsheviks), read this ultimatum at the plenary session of the Soviet. The worker deputies, among them Bolsheviks also, exchanged surprised looks and then passed on to the business in the order of the day. Not a man walked out of the Soviet. Shortly after that Lenin arrived from abroad, and he raked the ultimaticists over

the coals mercilessly. “You can’t—he lectured them—nor can any one else by means of ultimatums force the masses to skip the necessary phases of their own political development.”

Bogdanov, however, did not discard his methodology, and he subsequently founded an entire faction of “ultimaticists” or “up-and-outers” (Otzovists): they received the latter nickname because of their tendency to call upon the Bolsheviks to get up and get out from all those organizations that refused to accept the ultimatum laid down from above: “you must first accept our leadership.” The ultimaticists attempted to apply their policy not only to the Soviets but also in the parliamentary sphere and to the trade unions, in short, to all legal and semi-legal organizations of the working class.

Lenin’s fight against ultimatism was a fight for the correct interrelation between the party and the class. The ultimaticists, in the old Bolshevik party, never played a rôle of the slightest importance, otherwise the victory of Bolshevism would not have been possible. The strength of Bolshevism lay in its wide awake and sensitive relation to the class. Lenin continued his fight against ultimatism even when he was in supreme command, in particular and especially, as regards the attitude to the trade unions. “Indeed, if now in Russia,” he wrote, “after two and a half years of unheard of victories over the bourgeoisie of Russia and of the Entente, we were to place before the trade unions as a condition for their joining us that they ‘recognize the dictatorship’ we would be guilty of stupidity, we would impair our influence over the masses, we would aid the mensheviks. For the task of the Communists consists in being able to convince the backward to know how to work among them and not to fence ourselves from them by a barrier of fictitious and puerile ‘left’ slogans”. (THE INFANTILE DISEASE OF “LEFTISM”.) This holds all the more for the Communist parties of the West, which represent only a minority of the working class.

During the last few years, however, the situation in the U. S. S. R. has changed radically. The arming of the Communist party with sovereignty means the introduction of a new element into the interrelation between the vanguard and the class: into this relation

there enters the element of force. Lenin’s struggle against party and Soviet bureaucracy was in its essence a struggle not against the faulty organization of departments, nor against departmental red-tape and inefficiency but against the apparatus laying down the law to the class, against the transformation of the party bureaucracy into a new “ruling” clique. Lenin’s counsel, from his death bed, that a proletarian Control Commission be created independent of the C. E. C. and that Stalin and his faction be removed from the party apparatus was aimed against the bureaucratic degeneration of the party. For various reasons, which cannot be dealt with here, the party ignored this counsel. Of recent years the bureaucratic degeneration of the party has reached the extreme limit. Stalin’s apparatus simply lays down the law. The language of command is the language of ultimatism. Every worker must perform and forthwith accept as infallible all the past, present and future decisions of the C. E. C. The more erroneous the policies become, the greater are the pretensions to infallibility.

After gathering into its hands the apparatus of the Comintern, the Stalinist faction naturally transferred also its methods over to the foreign sections, i. e., to the Communist parties in the capitalist nations. The policy of the German leaders has for its counterpart the policy of the Moscow leadership. Thaelmann observes how Stalin’s bureaucracy rules the roost, by condemning as counter-revolutionary all those who do not recognize its infallibility. Wherein is Thaelmann worse than Stalin? If the working class does not willingly place itself under his leadership that is only because the working class is counter-revolutionary. Double dyed counter-revolutionaries are those who point out the balefulness of ultimatism. The collected works of Lenin are among the most counter-revolutionary publications. There is sufficient reason why Stalin should—as he does—submit them to such rigid censorship, particularly on their publication in foreign languages. Baleful as ultimatism is under all conditions—if in the U. S. S. R. it dissipates the moral capital of the party—it breeds double disaster for the Western parties which must yet begin accumulating their moral capital. Within the Soviet Union, at least, the victorious revolution has created material grounds for bureaucratic ultimatism, in the guise of an apparatus for repression. Whereas in capitalist countries, including Germany, ultimatism becomes converted into an impotent caricature, and interferes with the movement of the Communist party to power. Above all, the ultimatism of Thaelmann-Remmele is funny.

And whatever is funny is fatal, particularly in matters concerning a revolutionary party.

Let us for a moment transfer the problem to England, where the Communist party (as a consequence of the ruinous mistakes of Stalinist bureaucracy) still comprises an insignificant portion of the proletariat. If one accepts the theory that every type of the United Front, except the Communist, is “counter-revolutionary”, then obviously the British proletariat must put off its revolutionary struggle until that time when the Communist Party is able to come to the fore. But the Communist party cannot come to the front of the class except on the basis of its own revolutionary experience. However, its experience cannot take on a revolutionary character in any other way than by drawing mass millions into the struggle. Yet non-Communist masses, the more so if organized, cannot be drawn into the struggle except through the policy of the United Front. We fall into a charmed circle, out of which there is no way out by means of bureaucratic ultimatism. But the revolutionary dialectic has long since pointed the way out and has demonstrated it by countless examples in the most diverse spheres; by correlating the struggle for power with the struggle for reforms; by maintaining complete independence of the party while preserving the unity of the trade unions; by fighting against the bourgeois régime and at the same time utilizing its institutions; by criticizing relentlessly parliamentarism—from the parliamentary tribunal; by waging war mercilessly against reformism, and at the same time making practical agreements with the reformists in partial-struggles.

In England, the incompetence of ultimatism hits one in the eye because of the extreme weakness of the party. In Germany the balefulness of ultimatism is masked somewhat by the considerable numerical strength of the party and by its growth. But the German party is growing on account of the pressure of events and not thanks to the policies of the leadership; not because of ultimatism, but despite it. Moreover, the numerical growth of the party does not play the decisive rôle; what does decide is the political interrelation between the party and the class. Along this line, which is fundamental, the situation is not improving, because the German party has placed between itself and the class the thorny hedge of ultimatism.

—L. TROTSKY.

(To be Continued)

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