

On the Slogan of «Rank and File Leadership»

Some questions have arisen about the remarks in a recent issue of The Militant on the slogan of «Rank and File Leadership» which deserve a somewhat extended answer. The idea has been expressed that this slogan of the Stalinists really has some merits, that in reality it is only a restatement of the old demand of the Left wing for trade union democracy, and that in any case the slogan is not wrong in principle.

ANARCHIST CONCEPTION OF LEADERSHIP

Is «rank and file leadership» a new demand of the Left wing or is it simply the restatement of an old one? There are two answers to this question. It is an old idea that permeated the needle trades Left wing more or less before the emergence of the Communist leadership. But its advocacy by Communists is something new—one of the many Stalinist «innovations» which are in reality borrowed from anti-Marxist schools.

The leaders of the «company union» did not begin their treacherous work yesterday. The workers had good reason to learn about it even before 1919. The old movement against the bureaucrats, which had not yet thought out its problems and formulated a clear program, had a tendency to identify the idea of leadership with the ruling clique and had to a certain extent felt victim to nihilistic conceptions on the question of leadership as preached by the anarchists and the I. W. W. In this respect, but in no other, it can be said that «rank and file leadership» is an old slogan of the needle trades Left wing.

But ten years or more ago the Communists came to the front and soon gained the decisive leadership of the Left wing movement by virtue of their superior policy. One of the first positive steps of the Communist Left wing was to clear up the muddled ideology of the movement and sweep out the anarchistic rubbish which had paralyzed the struggles and strengthened the position of the reactionary bureaucrats.

HISTORY OF THE SLOGAN

On the one hand the Communist Left wing raised the demand for honest, militant leaders in the union in place of the corrupt, reactionary fakers. In harmony with that, and consistent with the organization program when the Left wing would apply when it gained the control of the union, it demanded the democratization of the union, and particularly of the strike machinery. (At that time, you see, the Left wing was not conducting a temporary excursion into the reactionary unions; it was aiming to conquer them, step by step, and it formulated its slogans accordingly.) The Left wing did not bluster about rank and file «leadership»; it demanded rank and file control. Moreover, it formulated this demand precisely, so that everyone could understand just what was meant.

Conference of the Needle Trades Left wing, September 12-13-14, 1925 the idea is expressed as follows:

«It is only through a strike machinery thoroughly representative of the workers in the shops that the membership can effectively be mobilized for strike activity... Therefore, foremost of our immediate aims during strikes is the democratization of the strike machinery. We therefore demand, pending the democratization of the whole union machinery as provided in this program: (1) that the general strike committees and heads of the strike be elected by the delegates and chairmen from the shops and responsible to them; (2) that all strike assessments be collected as legally due to this strike committee, to be expended only for strike purposes; (3) that secret diplomacy be done away with and negotiations with the employers be conducted on an open basis.»

Have these demands, so clear, so precise and so consistent with the whole general program of the Left wing for the renovation of the union on the basis of democratic centralism anything in common with the latter day mumbling about rank and file «leadership» of strikes? Are the Stalinists perhaps now saying, or trying to say, the same thing in a different way?

CONTROL OF LEADERSHIP?

In reply to this question it is only necessary to ask: If they mean the same thing that the Left wing meant in 1925, then why did they change the precise and correct formulation of that time for the present self-contradictory mish-mash? The reason for the change is clear enough: the aims are different now and the slogan has a different meaning. In 1925 the Left wing was fighting inside the union with the aim of wresting it out of the stranglehold of the reactionaries. In 1932 the Left wing, under the influence of the proconsuls of Stalin, are still monkeying around with the theory of «company unionism» and are searching for some kind of strike organization outside the existing union.

The fact that they hit upon a slogan that has no real sense or meaning, and that flatly contradicts Marxist conceptions of organization in favor of Wobblism, is nothing to be surprised at. They always do something like this when they experiment with «theory». A short while ago it was «independent leadership of strike struggles». After they had cracked their heads on the rocks with this formula, they quietly dropped it. Now, with a «new» slogan, which is quite different in appearance, they are attempting to accomplish the same design that failed before, namely, to find a substitute for the existing union in the midst of a strike regardless of the attitude of the majority of the workers.

Under pressure of the criticism we have brought against the slogan of rank and file leadership, and no doubt also stimulated by the poor reception it has received from the «rank and file», attempts are being made to interpret the slogan in a different way than was originally intended. Rose Wortis, for example, who strives to avoid obvious absurdities when the Party bosses are not watching, speaks in the Daily Worker for May 31st about «a real strike for union conditions under rank and file control.» (Our emphasis.)

Thus it would appear, according to the Wortis version, that rank and file leadership and rank and file control are synonymous expressions. But this is by no means the case, either in the field of organization or in the dictionary. In every democratic organization the ultimate control of the rank and file is presupposed; but the selection of the leadership and its functions remain a separate question. Only those who deny the role of leadership can solve the problem for themselves by a reference to «control». Wortis, for example, as a leader, but three-fourths of her leadership consisted in maneuvers to escape this «rank and file control» she talks about.

ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN STRIKES AND UNIONS

«Leadership is a necessary condition for any common action,» says the resolution of the Third World Congress of the Comintern. This principle, which does not at all exclude rank and file control of the leadership, implies however a selection of persons for leading functions. And it has the same force whether the persons selected are professional leaders or rank and file workers elevated to leading positions or committees. In every organization and in every action the question arises at once, and inescapably: Who is going to lead? You can answer, this group or that group; this committee or another. But if you wish to be taken seriously, do not say the rank and file is going to lead the rank and file. And do not try to pass the problem off with a statement that the rank and file will control. That is not the same thing.

In every organization certain persons are selected for leading functions or committees. By that fact they become «leaders», regardless of whether they have had previous experience or not. Such leaders, under the principle of democratic centralism, are inseparably fused with the rank and file, they are accountable to and controlled by the rank and file. This is understandable to anyone. But to confuse the leadership with the mass, or to contrast one to the other as the slogan of rank and file leadership does, presents a muddle which no one can understand and for which everyone can have his own interpretation.

DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM IN UNIONS

Leadership is one thing, control of the leadership is another. Democratic organization means, in the last analysis, rank and file control. But the Communists who think things out and formulate their ideas clearly do not speak merely of democracy. The organization form they advocate is democratic centralism.

And what does that mean? On the one hand it means democracy in the organization. On the other hand—as against the anarchistic and I. W. W. idea of «no leaders»—it means a recognition of the function of leadership. This leadership, in the Communist conception is not some kind of a clerical staff or information bureau. It is invested with real functions and powers, that is, it is given the possibility to lead. But—and herein lies the distinction from bureaucratism—the leadership is selected by the rank and file, is responsible to and, in the final analysis, is controlled by the rank and file. Democratic centralism, the Communist organization principle, therefore presupposes rank and file control, but excludes confusionist and demagogic demands for rank and file leadership. The 1925 program of the needle trades Left wing was permeated through and through with this rounded conception. The slogan of today contradicts it in principle.

The Wortis improvisation tries to smooth over the fundamental contradiction. She has had a lot of practice at that sort of business. It has been said that our previous article on this question confused matters by contrasting the «rank and file» agitation of the Stalinists in the trade union to their bureaucratic regime in the Party. The party, it is urged, is not the same as the trade union, and therefore the comparison is inappropriate. True enough, a distinction must be made between the political organization of the vanguard and the economic organization of the broad mass. They differ fundamentally in many ways, including organization forms, but according to the Lenin doctrine the organization principle of each is the same. Rank and file «leadership» is an absurdity in either case; rank and file control is ultimately necessary in both.

TROTSKY ON RANK AND FILE CONTROL

Note the remarks of comrade Trotsky on this point in the June 4 issue of the Militant: «As the first condition of the party control over the government Lenin put the control of the party mass over the apparatus.» These words will bear a careful reading several times. To shout for rank and file leadership in the union and soft pedal about rank and file control in the party is a double mistake, a howling inconsistency all the way around. Some of the Right wing union fakers, it seems, snatched up our criticism of the inconsistency of the Party bureaucrats and made use of it for their own purposes. But this by no means invalidates the criticism. The corrective for such parasitic exploitation of our exposure of Party errors by the Right wing is not to keep silent about the errors, but to compel the Party to correct them. Let the Party members exert some «rank and file control» in this respect in their own Party. The same task in the trade unions will then be greatly simplified and facilitated.

In order to wage an effective fight in the trade unions today, and to fortify the victory of tomorrow, the Left wing must have consistent slogans all along the line. As a minority it must defend those principles of organization which will govern the union when it comes under the control of the Left wing. It must practice in the Left wing unions under its leadership that same method which it demands in the reactionary unions where it constitutes an opposition. If the Left wing fails to do this, if it shuttles back and forth with a policy of expediency on every occasion, it will lose its principle guiding line, and with it the power to shape and lead a victorious movement of the masses.

This is what has been happening in recent years under the direction of full-blown Stalinism. The results speak for themselves; and in the catastrophic situation of the Left wing in the needle trades they speak with an exceptional force and clarity. The most pressing task of the Party and the Left wing is to throw off this incubus that weights it down and halts its progress at every step. The general fight to liberate the movement from this paralyzing influence has to be supported by a concrete struggle on every point, against every error which contributes to the defeat of the Left wing workers. The slogan of rank and file leadership is one of these errors, the harmfulness of which is clearly demonstrable.

There can be no ground for compromise with such a policy. The Left Opposition, by its criticism, has driven the Stalinists from more than one false position. It must not halt for a moment the effort to do the same in this case. A correction of this error requires no new wisdom. With the aid of the Lenin teaching the Left wing solved the problem in question in its program of 1925. What is needed now is a return to the 1925 formulation.

—JAMES P. CANNON.

STRIKE STRATEGY

by LEON TROTSKY

In the sphere of the trade unions the Communist leadership has entirely confused the party. The common course of the «third period» was directed toward parallel trade unions. The presupposition was that the mass movement would surge over the old organizations and that the organs of the R. G. O. (The Red Trade Union Opposition) would become the initiative committees of the economic struggle. A mere trifle was lacking for the realization of this plan: the mass movement. During floods in springtime, the waters carry away many a fence. Let us try removing the fence, decided Lozovsky, perhaps the floods of spring will then rise!

The reformist trade unions have survived. The Communist party succeeded in getting itself thrown out of the factories. Thereupon partial corrections began to be introduced into the trade union policy. The Communist party has refused to call upon the unorganized workers to join reformist unions. But it likewise has taken a stand against workers leaving the trade unions. While creating parallel organizations it has engendered the slogans of a battle for influence within the reformist unions. The whole mechanism represents an ideal self-sabotage.

DIE ROTE FAHNE complains that many Communists consider meaningless the participation in reformist unions. «Why should we revive the old push-cart?», they declare. And as a matter of fact, why? If one intends seriously to fight for the control of the old unions, one should appeal to the unorganized that they enter them; it is precisely the new strata that can supply the backing for the backing for the Left wing. But in that case one cannot build parallel unions, i. e., create a competitive agency to enroll the workers.

The policy that is recommended from above for work within the reformist unions rests on the same heights with all the other hodge-podge. DIE ROTE FAHNE on January 28, laced it into the Communist members of the Metal Workers Union of Duesseldorf because they issued the slogan «War without mercy against the participation of trade union leaders» in the support of the Bruening government. Such «opportunist» demands are disallowed because they presuppose (!) that the reformists are capable of refusing to support Bruening and his emergency decrees. Truly, this smacks of vicious horse-play! DIE ROTE FAHNE deems it sufficient to call the leaders names but disallows their being subjected to a political test by the masses.

And all the while, it is precisely within the trade unions that an exceptionally fruitful field is now open for action. While the social democratic party still has the wherewithal to fool the workers by political hullaballoo, the trade unions are confronted by the impasse of capitalism as by a hopeless prison wall. The 200,000-300,000 workers who are now organized in independent Red unions, could serve as a priceless leaven within the reformist brotherhoods.

CRITICISM AND SELF-CRITICISM

Towards the end of January there was held in Berlin a Communist conference of the factory committees from the entire country. DIE ROTE FAHNE printed the report, «The factory committees are welding the Red Workers Front» (February 2, 1932). But you would seek in vain for information regards the composition of the conference, the number of industries and workers represented. In contradistinction to Bolshevism, which painstakingly and openly marked every change in the correlation of forces within the working class, the German Stalinists, following in the footsteps of the Russian, play hide and seek. They are loth to admit that the Communist factory committees compromised less than 4 per cent as against 84 per cent of the social democracy! In this correlation is summed up the balance of the «third period.» Suppose one does call the isolation of Communists in industry, the «Red United Front», will this really help further the matter?

The prolonged crisis of capitalism induces within the proletariat the most virulent and dangerous line of demarcation: between the employed and the unemployed. Through the circumstance that the reformists control the industrial centers while the Communists control the unemployed, both sections of the proletariat are being paralyzed. The employed are in a position to bide a while longer. The unemployed are more impatient. At present their impatience bears a revolutionary character. But should the Communist party fail to find such forms and slogans for the struggle as would unite the employed and the unemployed and thereby open the perspective of a revolutionary solution, the impatience of the unemployed will inevitably react against the Communist party.

In 1917, despite the correct policy of the Bolshevik party and the rapid development of the revolution, the more badly off and the more impatient strata of the proletariat, even in Petrograd, began between September and October, to look away from the Bolsheviks towards the syndicalists and anarchists. Had not the October overturn broken out in time, the disintegration within the proletariat would have become acute and would have led to the decay of the revolution. In Germany there is no need for anarchists; their place can be taken by the National-Socialists who have wedded anarchist demagoguery with conscious reactionary aims.

The workers are by no means immunized once for all against the influence of Fascism. The proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie represent coupled receptacles, especially under the present conditions, when the reserve army of workers cannot but effuse petty traders and hawkers, etc., while the bankrupt petty bourgeoisie effuses proletarians and lumpen-proletarians. Salaried employees, the technical and administrative personnel and certain strata of the functionaries

composed in the past one of the most important supports of the social democracy. At present, these elements have gone or are going over to the National Socialists. They are capable of drawing in their wake, if they haven't already begun to do so, a stratum of the labor aristocracy. In this direction, National Socialism is penetrating into the proletariat from above.

Considerably more dangerous, however, is its possible penetration from below, through the unemployed. No class can long exist without perspectives and hopes. The unemployed do not represent a class, but they already compose a very compact and substantial layer, which is vainly striving to tear itself away from intolerable conditions. If it is true in general that only the proletarian revolution can save Germany from disintegration and decay, this is especially true as regards the millions of unemployed.

Alongside of the impotence of the Communist party in the factories and in trade unions, the numerical growth of the party resolves nothing. Within a tottering nation shot through by crisis and contradictions, an extreme left party can find new supporters in tens of thousands, especially if its entire apparatus is directed to the sole purpose of capturing members, in the line «of competition». Everything depends upon the interrelation between the party and the class. A single employed Communist who is elected to the Factory Committee or to the administration of a trade union bears a greater significance than a thousand new members, picked up here and there, who enter the party today in order to leave it tomorrow.

But the individual influx of members into the party will not at all continue indefinitely. If the Communist party continues any longer to delay the struggle until that moment when it shall have entirely pushed out the reformists, then it will learn for certain that after a given point the social democracy will cease losing its influence to the Communist party, while the Fascists will begin disintegrating the unemployed who are the chief support of the Communist party. Failure to utilize its forces for the tasks that spring from the entire environment never passes scot-free for a political party.

WHAT IS A «RED UNITED FRONT»

In order to clear the road for the mass struggle, the Communist party strives to stimulate sectional strikes. The successes in this sphere have not been great. As ever, the Stalinists devote themselves to self-criticism, «We are as yet incapable of organizing»... «We haven't yet learned how to attract»... «We haven't as yet learned how to capture»... What has «we» got to do with it, it unflinchingly means «you». The theory of the March days in 1921, of blessed memory, is being resurrected, which proposed to «electrify» the proletariat by means of the offensive activities of the minority. But the workers are in no need whatever of being «electrified». What they want is that they be given a clear perspective, and be aided in creating the bases for a mass movement.

In its strike strategy the Communist party is obviously motivated by isolated citations from Lenin as interpreted by Manuilsky or Lozovsky. As a matter of fact, there had been periods wherein the mensheviks fought against the «strike frenzy», while the Bolsheviks, on the contrary, took their place at the head of every new strike, drawing into the movement ever increasing masses. This was in response to the period of the awakening of new class strata. Such was the tactic of the Bolsheviks in 1905; and during the industrial upward trend in the years preceding the war; and during the first months of the February revolution.

But in the period directly preceding October, beginning with the July clash of 1917, the tactic of the Bolsheviks assumed another character; they held back strikes, they applied the brake to them, because every large strike had the tendency to turn into a decisive battle, while the political postulates for it had not as yet matured.

However, during those months the Bolsheviks continued to place themselves at the head of all strikes which flared up, despite their measures of precaution, chiefly in the more backward branches of industry (among textile workers, leather workers, etc.).

While under some conditions the Bolsheviks boldly stimulated strikes in the interests of the revolution, under other conditions, they, on the contrary, restrained from strikes in the interests of the revolution. In this sphere as well as in others, there is no ready made formula. But in every given period, the strike tactics of the Bolsheviks always composed a part of the general tactics, and to the advanced workers the connection between the part and the whole was always clear.

How do matters stand now in Germany? The employed workers do not resist wage cuts because they are in fear of the unemployed. Small wonder; in the face of several million unemployed, the ordinary trade-union strike, so organized, is obviously futile. It is doubly futile in the face of political antagonism between the employed and unemployed. This does not exclude sectional strikes, especially in the more backward and less centralized branches of industry. But it is just the workers of the more important branches of industry who, in such an environment evince a leaning toward heeding the voices of the reformist leaders. The attempts of the Communist party to unleash a strike struggle, without changing the general situation within the proletariat, lead only to minor guerrilla operations, which, even if successful, are left without a sequel.

—L. TROTSKY.

(From WHAT NEXT—Vital Questions for the German proletariat)

THE MILITANT
Published weekly by the Communist League of America (Opposition) at 84 East 10th St., N. Y.
EDITORIAL BOARD
Martin Abern James P. Cannon
Max Shachtman Maurice Spector
Arne Swabeck
Entered as second class mail matter November 28, 1923, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y. Under the act of March 3, 1879.
SATURDAY, JUNE 11, 1932
Vol. 5 No. 24 (Whole No. 120)
Subscription rate: \$2.00 per year; foreign \$2.50. Five cents per copy.
Bundle rates, 3 cents per copy.