

Shall We Assume Leadership?

By John Pepper

NO correct policy is possible on the Labor Party question, if one sees only the working class and not the other classes of capitalist society as well. The destiny of Communists is to be the most conscious part of the working class; but they cannot fulfill this destiny if they limit themselves to analyzing only the working class, disregarding the other classes, or the relations of the working class to those other classes. Capitalist society is an entity, all of whose parts are interconnected. If one sees only the single parts and not the whole, one must inevitably arrive at false conclusions. It is sectarianism for a Communist to see only "pure Communism," and not the masses of the labor movement. But from the Marxian standpoint it is also sectarianism to see nothing but the organized labor movement; to forget the millions of unorganized workers, the millions of bankrupt and discontented farmers, and the other classes of capitalist society. A leftist sectarianism is no worse than the guild sectarianism of certain labor leaders.

In the September issue of the *Liberator* I came to the conclusion that we are facing a deep-going revolution, not a proletarian revolution, but a La Follette revolution. I stated that in this revolution the working class will free itself from the rule of the Gompers bureaucracy, will acquire a class consciousness on a national scale. I can add that this period will produce the Communist mass party. We should not forget for a moment this general revolutionary situation. We must not allow ourselves to be influenced one-sidedly by the united attack of the bureaucracy of the American Federation of Labor, from Gompers to Fitzpatrick. We must not forget that the bitter counter-attacks of the Gompers bureaucracy are the result of the rapid advance of the revolutionary elements in the labor movement. These attacks are only the symptoms of the increasing alliance of the labor leaders with the capitalists against the more and more imminent revolutionary crisis looming up.

The great political crisis, the first period of which we see now beginning, brings with it very complicated tasks for the revolutionists in the United States. We have a two-fold task: First, to support the real people's movement—the La Follette revolution, against big capital and against the big capitalist parties. Second, to criticize pitilessly the half-measures and hesitancy of the La Follette movement and employ every means to organize the workers and exploited farmers, separate from and independent of the well-to-do farmers and small businessmen.

The Third Party movement is to be supported and at the same time criticized mercilessly. Though striving to make the Labor Party movement as inclusive as possible, we simultaneously organize the left wing elements into the Federated Farmer-Labor Party. We must support the La Follette revolution in spite of its petty bourgeois character, for it is of paramount interest to revolutionists to transform the United States government from a virtual mon-

archy into a democracy. However, we should make it clear to the workers and exploited farmers that though we support the well-to-do farmers and small businessmen in the struggle against this capitalist monarchy which calls itself the Republic of the United States of America, we are to carry the fight still further, until we shall have secured the rule of the workers and exploited farmers. The question of the Labor Party and of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party is to be considered from this broad viewpoint of general revolutionary crisis, and not exclusively from the narrower viewpoint of the trade union movement. It is indeed possible that through the founding of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party we have lost the friendship of some progressive labor leaders. But through the organization of this Party, we have won the best propaganda instrument for the creation of a broad labor party, a basis for the immediate organization of the hundreds of thousands of militant workers; we now have the best means for reaching the most advanced elements of the exploited farmers. It is always better to isolate oneself from a few dubious progressive labor leaders, than from the general process of the revolution.

The Labor Party—A Political Question

In the present political situation in the United States, the most important political task of the Workers Party is to propagate the Labor Party idea and to help in organizing a Labor Party. This policy does not mean, however, that we are bound by principle to the specific Labor Party form of party organization.

On principle, we are advocates of a class party of the proletariat. This class party may assume various forms of organization: It may have individual members or it might be a bloc of trade unions (Labor Party). Historical experience has shown that the form of organization consisting of individual membership is the more advanced and elastic one. In those countries where the old Social Democratic Parties were based on individual membership the Communists, through splitting or capturing the majority, were able to sweep along great masses of workers and form them into mass Communist parties more easily than in those countries in which there were Labor Parties. Of course, the form of Party organization has not been the only deciding factor. In Great Britain, in Belgium and Australia, where Labor Parties exist, we still have no Communist mass party. But in Germany, France, and Czecho-Slovakia, where the Social Democratic Parties had an individual membership, mighty mass Communist Parties have been built up through splitting the party or capturing a majority. In Hungary, where the Social Democratic Party had no separate organization, but has been based upon trade unions, it was not possible to form a real Communist Party even during the rule of the Soviet dictatorship. Up to now, Norway has been the only country where the Communists have secured the majority in a working class party which is not based on individual membership, but on trade unions. Direct connection with the trade unions has its advantages,

but on the whole, it is an obstacle in the way of a Communist development of our Norwegian party. The Communist International has therefore for years been conducting a fight for changing our Norwegian Party from a Party built on trade unions to one having an individual membership.

These past lessons of the international labor movement suffice to support our statement that we cannot be bound by principle to the specific Labor Party form of party organization. At present we are for the Labor Party idea for three reasons: First, the objective conditions driving the proletariat to political independence and class consciousness. These objective conditions are centralization of state power, interference of the government in the daily life of the workers and farmers, disintegration of the old capitalist parties, an increasing homogeneity of the working class. Second, there is no immediate hope for building up a mass party of the working class based on individual membership. Third, there is a growing movement among the rank and file demanding a Labor Party built upon trade unions.

Do We Fear to Assume Leadership?

The Labor Party movement in America today is a rank and file movement. The masses of workers demand more and more insistently the formation of a Labor Party. Despite the pressure of the American Federation of Labor, despite the betrayal by so many labor leaders, many city and state Labor Parties have been organized in recent months. The development of the Labor Party in America is taking a different direction from that in Great Britain. The British Labor Party was formed after the governmental and judicial power endangered the existence of the trade union movement. It was organized from above by the officials of the trade union movement. The lessons of the great mass strikes in the United States in the summer of 1922 have on the one hand shown the absolute necessity of the Labor Party as a defensive weapon for trade unions; on the other hand, they have shown, just as clearly, that the reactionary labor leaders are so closely bound up with the old capitalistic parties that they would rather let the whole labor movement be ruined than form an independent Labor Party. Those to whom the Cleveland Conference did not show clearly that the Labor Party cannot be formed with Johnston and his kind, but against them, must grasp at last the main lessons of the Albany Conference; namely, that the Socialist Party tactic of hesitation, of continually putting off the formation of the Labor Party in favor of an alliance with the reactionary labor leaders, must lead to political bankruptcy. In Albany, the labor leaders threw out the Socialist Party leaders, although the Socialist Party surrendered completely to the labor leaders. The rank and file did not back the Socialist Party just because it did not fight for the Labor Party. The Fitzpatrick group of the Farmer-Labor Party did fight, for a while, for the Labor Party. This group was defeated at the Cleveland Conference. Thereupon it split away from the Conference for Progressive Political Action. It then sent out a call for the July 3rd Convention, which amounted to a break with the tactic that still awaited something from the Labor leaders. It proclaimed the issue of the Labor Party openly as an issue of the rank and file.

T H E L I B E R A T O R

The Workers Party protested against this split, not because it based any hopes upon Johnston, Stone or Keating, but because it hoped that with continued propaganda within the Conference for Progressive Political Action, greater masses would be swept along with a later split. Upon the July 3rd Convention being convoked, the Workers Party immediately accepted the fact and put forth the greatest efforts for making the July 3rd Convention a real expression of the laboring masses. Success was achieved. The July 3rd Convention became a great and enthusiastic expression of the masses. But in the Convention, the Fitzpatrick group deserted the Labor Party idea. Why? The July 3rd Convention revealed the fact that the big international unions did not come, that only local unions and city central bodies were represented, that in fact, the labor party movement to-day is a rank and file proposition. It also showed another fact; namely, that the rank and file is permeated with Communist influence. The Fitzpatrick group had to choose between its "respectability" and friendship with Gompers on the one hand, and this rank and file permeated with Communist ideology on the other. Fitzpatrick chose the former, made a vicious attack against the Communist International, and later wrote an open letter against amalgamation, against the Trade Union Educational League, and expressed his solidarity with Gompers.

Not a single organized political group outside of the Workers Party exists to-day which wishes to take up the fight for the Labor Party on a national scale; even against the reactionary leaders. Our Party cannot and must not be frightened back from assuming leadership in the Labor Party movement. To be cautious is a Communist virtue; but to be over-cautious is the greatest Communist sin.

Labor Party Idea and the Federated.

Certain critics of our Party say that the creation of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party was a mistake and a crime against the Labor Party idea. The three main sources of this criticism are: First; some comrades being very skeptical towards the Labor Party idea on principle, fear that the Workers Party will lose its identity within the Labor Party. Second; other comrades who have not enough confidence in our Communist Party fear the responsibilities which this assumption of leadership in the labor movement entails for us. Third; among the comrades who chiefly concern themselves with trade union problems there are those who fear that we might lose the support of some progressive union leaders who until now have supported the amalgamation campaign.

It would be a mistake on the part of the Workers Party to disregard these forebodings. Of course we should secure every guarantee that our Party will not lose its identity within the Labor Party. We must reckon with all the difficulties and burdens which leadership in the Labor Party movement means for our Party. We are bound to proceed very cautiously in order to sacrifice as little as possible in the trade union movement. Yet despite these forebodings we must go forward. We cannot run away from the duty of assuming leadership in the labor movement whenever and wherever possible.

The significance of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party should not be measured according to the abstract, ideal Labor Party idea, but according to the practical advantages

which it gives to the revolutionary movement. Unlike the British Labor Party, the Federated Farmer-Labor Party does not comprise the whole labor movement, but only the left wing. But it is of great significance that the left wing has for the first time organized politically. Besides, the Federated Farmer-Labor Party is a real mass party. In America the organization of several hundred thousand workers into a party means the organization of a mass party. This militant left wing has a powerful influence on the half-awakened and indifferent masses of workers. It is ridiculous naivete to imagine that the whole American working class can be organized at one stroke. The British Labor Party, in spite of having been organized from above, did not, at the outset, have four million, but less than a million members. The Workers Party has always held that the Federated Farmer-Labor Party is not the end, but the beginning of the formation of the Labor Party.

It is a long, long way from the expression of a sentiment to the Tipperary of an actual organization. Some consider it a defeat for the Workers Party that only part of the 600,000 workers and farmers whose representatives declared themselves for a Labor party on July 3rd are today in the Federated Farmer-Labor Party. From this erroneous point of view, the winning over of the Independent Social Democratic Party in Germany, one of the most brilliant victories of the Communist International, would also have to be counted as a defeat. In Germany, the Spartacus League had about 80,000 members, while the Independent Socialist Party was then a great mass party of about 860,000 members. Zinoviev's brilliant speech at the Convention in Halle won over a majority of the delegates of the Independent Socialist Party. The right wing then withdrew, and continued as the Independent Socialist Party. It was estimated that a left wing of between four and five hundred thousand workers united with the Communist Party. In reality there were not so many, as the Communist Party of Germany even today has only 300,000 dues paying members. In America, the Workers Party has fewer members than the Spartacus League had at that time; it has no brilliant revolutionary traditions, and it must therefore measure its victories by a lower standard.

Three Arguments—Three Errors

What are the main arguments against the policies of the Workers Party? The first argument is that we lose, through the fight for the Federated Farmer-Labor Party, connections and friendship with many progressive labor leaders who were for amalgamation. The Workers Party has always been careful not to put too much faith in these progressive labor leaders, while warning the comrades not to make unwarranted attacks on them. The swing to the right of some of these progressives did not take place as a consequence of the July 3rd Convention, but was in evidence even before. Gompers had exerted pressure against them in Seattle, Minneapolis, Detroit and Chicago, which in its turn was provoked by the growing influence of the Communists. The history of the International Labor movement shows that at decisive turning points certain of these progressive hesitating labor leaders go the left, as recently in America Howat, Kennedy and Macdonald did. Or they go the right and unite with the reactionaries, for example, Fitzpatrick, Crispian and Dittman in Germany were

nearer to the Communist International than Fitzpatrick. They accepted not only the idea of amalgamation but the dictatorship of the proletariat and the Soviet form of government. In Moscow they negotiated for affiliation with the Communist International. Yet they are today bitter opponents of the Communists, and support the Socialist-bourgeois coalition government in Germany. Frossard and Paul Levi though once members of the Communist International have become dangerous enemies. We also have examples of leaders being lost to us and returning, like Serrati. We must employ every means to bind these progressive leaders to the Communists, but in this tactic we have two limits; we cannot sacrifice our policies for their sake nor can we forfeit the support of the rank and file. The break with the Fitzpatrick group could have been avoided, not through more or less skillful negotiations, but only by surrendering the leadership of the Workers Party in the fight for the idea of the Labor Party, or by delivering to the old Farmer-Labor Party all the trade unions where we have an influence. This would mean delivering them to non-Communist leadership. Or we might voluntarily have foregone the affiliation of the Workers Party to the Labor Party. Finally we might also have betrayed the confidence of the rank and file which came to Chicago on July 3rd with the express desire to organize the Labor Party immediately.

The second main argument against the tactics of the Workers Party is that the creation of the Federated Party is the result of a dual unionist policy. This is an absolutely false argument. It is a schematic, mechanical transference of trade union policies into a political field. We Communists are opponents of dual unionism on the economic field, because it means the alienation and isolation of the militant minority from those organizations where great masses of indifferent workers are found. But on the political field it is an absolute necessity to organize the militant, revolutionary, Communist minority as a separate unit, for only in this way can the conservative laboring masses be successfully permeated with a revolutionary ideology. Dual unionism on the trade union field makes it impossible for the militants to capture the majority of the working class. Dual organization on the political field, however, creates the first basic condition for capturing the minds of the working masses; in other words, creates the Communist Party. Of course, it would be better if in every country, there were only one party of the working class—the Communist Party. But historical conditions have created the older Social Democratic parties and labor parties, and such conditions as the prestige of old, well-known leaders, the counter-revolutionary interests of the labor aristocracy, the existence of old Party machines, and the direct support of the bourgeoisie, still keep these parties alive and strong. As long as these conditions exist, the conservative parties of labor will continue to exist and the organization of a Communist Party will necessarily mean a dual organization on the political field. Arguing against dual unionism on the political field in the last analysis is nothing more or less than arguing against an independent Communist Party.

The third argument is that we can indeed afford to have competition between the Communist Party and the Socialist Party, because these differ fundamentally on prin-

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ciple; but we cannot have several competing labor parties in one country because they have all the same principles of organization. This argument also is basically false. It has as a basis the abstract, ideal labor party which immediately upon its formation embraces the entire working class. This is a Utopian, erroneous, one-sided interpretation of the British experience. This view maintains that because there has been only one Labor Party in England, therefore only one labor party can exist in all other countries. Such a conception brings to mind the virgin birth theory, in that it altogether forgets the natural birth of the Labor Party. Experience shows that labor parties have been built by a political group uniting and organizing under its leadership all or a part of the trade union movement. Thus in England the Independent Labor group of pink socialists organized the Labor Party. In England the Labor Party remained without competition on the political field because among other reasons no other political groups attempted to organize the trade unions under their political influence. The so-called Marxist Social-Democrats were just as sectarian and just as much opponents on principle of the Labor Party, as was our Workers Party a year ago, or like the early Communist Party in Great Britain. It is interesting to note that in 1906, in its year of organization, the British Labor Party had 975,182 members, and the Independent Labor Party only 20,884 members. The proportion, therefore, between the membership of the British Party and its leading political group was even more unfavorable than the proportion between the Federated Farmer-Labor Party and the Workers Party. In America, we have a number of political groups which fight for influence within the trade union movement. This attempt to influence the workers is seen in the organization of various labor parties. The Socialist Party tries to form a labor party. The old Farmer-Labor Party tries to form another another labor party. The Workers Party has helped in the formation of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party. It is simply dogmatic to decree that it is against the rules of the game for several labor parties to attempt to exist in one country.