

# The Workers Party at a Turning Point

By JOHN PEPPER

Our Party stands before a modification of its function.

Briefly stated, we can divide the history of our Communist Party since its creation, into three periods.

The first period, the stage of collecting the Communist forces, beginning with the separation from the Socialist Party until about the Bridgman Convention of August, 1922.

The second period: the fight for a standing in the labor movement, from the summer of 1922 to the Labor Party Convention in Chicago, July 3, 1923.

And we are now on the threshold of the third period: the period in which we must begin to lead that part of the working class which stands under our influence, into the political struggles against the capitalists and capitalist government. This period begins with the organization of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party.

## The Period of Collecting the Communist Forces

The first period, the collecting of the Communist forces, was the period of constant factional fights over the question of the best form of organization into which the Communist forces should be gathered. The first great question of organization was whether there shall be a uniform party or a party built on Language Federations. The second question of organization was of the relation between overground and underground work of the Communists. The third question of organization was whether the underground is the only possible form of existence for the Communist Party in America, or whether, depending upon conditions, there shall be an underground or overground form of organization. That which all these problems had in common was that they were all internal problems of the Party, and not problems of the great, broad, labor movement, and still less were they the problems of general American politics.

It was a period of selection and collecting of Communist elements in the United States. It is therefore self-evident that the main question was who is a "good Communist."

## The Period of the Fight for a Standing in the Labor Movement

The second period, the period of fighting for standing in the labor movement, shows an entirely different picture. The main problem was, how shall the Communists approach the masses, how shall the Workers Party send as deep roots as possible into the masses. In general, the tactic of the United Front served to attain this aim. Particularly, the campaign for amalgamation, the defense drive, the campaign for the defense of the foreign-born workers, the anti-Fascist campaign and the fight for the Labor Party were the various roads leading to the various divisions of the masses. The whole life of the Party changed fundamentally in this period which has covered the last year. Our comrades were no longer occupied with questions of the best form of Party organization, but with organizational details of various labor organizations outside of our Party. It was no longer sufficient for our Party members simply to go to the branch meetings of the Party, but it was their duty to become members of labor organizations, and become the most energetic participants in meetings and conventions of the labor movement. We have had no organized factional fights at all during the last year. It is characteristic in the highest degree that, as the main problem was no longer the selection and collection of Communist forces, but the gaining of influence by the Communists in the labor movement, the most usual classification of Party members was no longer who is a "good Party member," but who is a "good trade unionist."

A part of the Party comrades—and not the worst ones—those who rendered the best service to the Party in collecting the Communist forces, did not grasp immediately or altogether the change of function of the Party. They clung to the underground form of organization, as to a fetish, and considered it the surest guarantee for barring out of the

Communist Party those who were not 100 per cent pure Communists. They opposed the idea of the Labor Party because they feared that this meant sacrificing of the Communist Party. There was a tendency at that time in our Party, which impatiently demanded the expulsion of those comrades who could not understand and go along with the change of function of the Party. But the C. E. C. of our Party, instead of expulsion of these comrades, exercised patience and sought to convince, with the result that the greatest part of these comrades became the best workers in the trade unions and for the Labor Party idea.

## The Period of Political Struggles

The organizing of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party means for our Party, the beginning of a new era. The Workers Party is the only political group which has not betrayed the formation of a Labor Party. At the July 3rd Convention in Chicago, the Workers Party was the political driving force which helped to crystallize into an organization the mighty sentiment of the rank and file.

In the first period of the history of our Party we collected the Communist forces. In the second period, the Communists acquired influence among the laboring masses. But this influence lays a very great responsibility upon us. The laboring masses consider the Communists as their leaders, and they expect that we show them the best ways and means of fighting against the capitalists and capitalist government. In the third period of its history, which is now beginning, it is the duty of our Party to lead into the political struggle the masses which are under its influence.

In the first period our Party was occupied only with internal problems of organization. In the second period it was mainly occupied with trade union problems. In the third period it must occupy itself more than ever before, with general political problems. In the first period the vision of the greatest part of our members did not reach further than the internal factional fights of the Communist Party. In the second period

the vision of our Party was enlarged, but with a great part of our comrades it was still no further than the internal struggles of the labor movement. We must now broaden the vision of the Party. We must perceive also the internal conflicts of the various classes of capitalist society. We must undertake more than ever before, the fight against the government.

It would of course be a mistake for anyone to believe that the tasks of the first and second periods no longer hold good, and are not important to the third period. It goes without saying that we must still select and collect the Communist forces. We still have not the Communist mass party. It is self-evident that we must still conduct the greatest struggle in order to influence the masses. We still have not the majority of the American working class under Communist influence.

But now in the third period we have a richer and more complicated task: We must take over, in addition to the tasks of the first and second period, also that of the third period, namely, the task of leading the masses into the political struggle.

This new task creates a much more difficult and complicated situation for our Party, and means a greater modification of the function of the Party than the transition from the first to the second period. It is also most self-evident that a part of our Party comrades—and again not the worst part—cannot immediately and elastically enough understand this modification in the function of our Party. A part of our most active and industrious comrades who have been rendering the best service to the Party in the fight for a standing in the labor movement, and in the fight in the trade unions, do not understand to-day the policies of the Party in the question of the Labor Party. They identify the Party too closely with the trade unions, and even if not in their theory, yet in their practice, they wish that the Party would not be a political party, but simply a left wing of the trade union movement. This view was expressed with distilled falsity in the paper issued

by the Williamsburg branch of our New York Party organization in this way: The Workers Party should, wherever possible, do nothing as a Party, but everything thru the trade unions. Such close adaptation of the Party to the trade unions as was called for in the organ of the Williamsburg branch means the sacrifice of the role of leadership of the Communist Party as a Party. It is just as erroneous as the slogan which was launched formerly in Russia by the right elements and later by the leftists of the Communist Labor Party of Germany, that the Communist Party shall assimilate itself with the Soviets. Of course, the participation in the trade union movement is a life and death question for our Party. Of course we must compel every Party member to become a member of a trade union. Of course we must support and enlarge the Trade Union Educational League tenfold. But it would be a great mistake and in the present new period an obstacle to the further development of our Party if we would devote ourselves exclusively to trade union problems, and if we do not realize that a Communist Party must be not merely the left wing of the trade union movement, but a political party, concerned with all political and social questions. In the present period we must ask not only who is a "good Communist," and who is a "good trade unionist," but also who is good at understanding American politics.

We should not use the tactics of persecution and expulsion toward those comrades who do not grasp quickly enough that this modification in the function of the Party is necessary and inevitable; but we must once more employ the means of patience and conviction. However, that which we cannot sacrifice is that every comrade, whether he is convinced or not, must carry out the policy of the Party and the instructions of the Central Executive Committee decided upon. The comrades who are as yet unconvinced should not forget the classical maxim expressed by Zinoviev: Discipline begins where conviction ends.