

The Trade Union Question

The trade unions are the basic organizations of the working class. They are also the widest form of organization, encompassing all the organized workers in a given industry or trade. Trade unions are not merely defensive organization, but under proper leadership can and will play a powerful role in the struggle to overthrow the bourgeoisie.

As Lenin pointed out in What Is To Be Done?, "Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside of the economic struggle, from outside of the sphere of relations between workers and employers." The formation of trade unions was an immensely significant step in the organization and struggle of the working class. However, left on their own, the highest level to which they can rise is the politics of trade unionism, a system of politics still within the realm of bourgeois ideology. For this reason, it is essential that communists go into the unions in order to turn them into genuine revolutionary organizations fighting against capitalism and for the establishment of socialism. What are the conditions we face there?

With the advent of imperialism around the beginning of the 20th century, the bourgeoisie gained more weapons in their fight against the working class. Up to that point, violent repression was widely used to stifle the efforts of the workers to organize themselves into unions. Every step in the struggle for labor unions had to be wrestled from the ruling class by means of hard, bloody battles. However, imperialism made it possible for the bourgeoisie to buy off a stratum of the workers. This stratum is called the labor aristocracy. This upper crust of the working class is a bribed sector, bribed through the superprofits sucked out of the colonies and neo-colonies, from the oppressed nations and peoples of the world. The labor aristocracy is the fifth column of the ruling class within the ranks of the workers themselves. In the United States, this stratum is bigger and more entrenched than anywhere else, due to US Imperialism's position as "top dog" in the world for so long.

The labor aristocracy includes the group of traitors that have gained control of the unions, the trade union bureaucrats (TUBs). These misleaders are well paid, in money and privilege, to work hand in glove with their capitalist masters. With this stratum in control of the unions, we will not only see the unions not struggle for revolution, but in fact, they will remain the solid supporters of the bourgeoisie. In some unions, these labor hacks act in a dictatorial manner, suppressing all rights of the members. In others, they adopt reformist tactics, designed to mislead and create illusions among the workers as to the nature of their problems. In either case, these union bosses are the willing tools of the capitalists.

Our work can be divided into legal and illegal work. The purpose of our open, legal work is to strengthen our illegal work. Illegal work is that work which directly challenges the existence of the capitalist economic system and the state which serves it. (This does not mean it is always closed). As the main form of illegal work, communists must master the use of factory nuclei and work to establish them now. To put off this vitally important matter would be a big error. Our future party must be based in such nuclei and the task of building them will become much harder as the bourgeoisie finds it must resort to increasing fascist measures to maintain its rule.

Our main task within the working class at this time is summed up in the slogan "Win the Advanced to Communism." We follow Lenin's definition, found in Retrograde Trend, of the various political strata of the working class. We do this not to turn Marxism into a dead dogma, but to insure that those workers that we actually consolidate into the pre-Party group or into the Party are truly advanced elements of the proletariat, dedicated to the revolution. We don't mechanically transfer what was true in another time and place to this country, but

we know that such workers exist and that the crisis of imperialism is bound to bring forth more. The majority of the advanced and intermediate workers have not been won to communism as yet. These workers are to be found in the fire of class struggle; there is no shortcut! The line (which we once held in practice) that says that communists should not take part in leading the struggles of the working class until after the nuclei are established is a "left" line which objectively liquidates factory nuclei, for it leaves us with no way of identifying and winning the advanced workers.

Thus, it is essential for communists to carry out work in the trade unions, even now before the Party is built. Communists must seize the trade unions through struggle and leadership to make them fighting, broad organizations attacking capitalism and moving the revolution forward. But how is this done without falling into economism? Communists must lend a planned, conscious character to the struggles of the class, based on a systematic analysis of the objective conditions in a given workplace, union, etc. In other words, we work not to build the spontaneous movement so that there can be "a lot of action," but to divert those spontaneous struggles from trade unionism, reformism, revisionism, etc., onto the path of revolution. In plants where there exists a high degree of spontaneous struggle, communists move to the leadership in order to steer the masses onto a correct course. In plants where very little or no struggle exists, we must work to initiate struggle in a planned way. This is not "bowing to spontaneity." Bowing to spontaneity is the vulgar economist line of worshipping every movement with no attempt to shed the light of Marxism-Leninism on them, reducing everything to the lowest possible level and therefore hindering the revolution.

Strategically we must direct the main blow of our work at the social props of the bourgeoisie, the misleaders who stand in the way of the working class achieving victory. For the US multi-national proletariat, these social props are the trade union bureaucrats and the sham "communists" (revisionists, trotskyists, social democrats, and other opportunists). At the present time our efforts center around the TUBs, as the sham "communists" currently hold no great influence over the masses. However, we know that as the TUBs are discredited and isolated, the bourgeoisie will use the sham "communists" to take up the role of main social prop, and that our work at this time must not ignore them and later will center around them.

The clearing out of the TUBs from the trade unions will be a difficult and protracted fight and our work has to be thorough, persistent, and above all based on a correct line. We must guard against right and left deviations.

The most serious danger is the right one, exemplified by the OL and RCP in their uncritical support of certain labor misleaders. We cannot allow occasional militant words from the TUBs fool us to their class collaborationist essence. Under the slogan of "Moving the Trade Unions to the Left," the right opportunist OL backs reformist Arnold Miller and only tells the workers that he is a sell-out long after the most backward miner has learned of this fact, not through the pages of The Call, but through bitter experience. The RCP is now preparing the same backstabbing with their whole-hearted support of Ed Sadlowski in the United Steel Workers.

The left danger is to ignore the tremendous influence the labor misleaders have among the masses and so refuse to unite with them tactically for any reason. This comes from a serious misreading of the current objective and subjective factors in the trade unions.

In contrast to right and "left" lines, the Marxist-Leninist stance towards the labor aristocracy and especially the trade union bureaucrats is to combat and expose them before the masses. In this struggle, the masses will be the decisive factor, the makers of history, and not the small number of communists. Our role in to make them conscious of their role and tasks; we therefore have to focus the struggle on mass struggle, involving the broad masses of workers wherever

possible, and not just a small contingent. These also have to be militant struggles, that is, not confined to the bounds of bourgeois legality.

Our tactics in dealing with the labor bureaucrats are flexible. In unions where the TUBs have some mass following and where they at least some of the time take stands and actions in favor of the workers' interests, we unite with them tactically under certain conditions. These conditions are: 1) if doing so will help the position of the workers, 2) we can keep our independence and initiative, thereby continuing to explain to the workers the real reasons for their oppression and the real ways to fight it, and 3) we can criticize the misleaders not just after the fact, but before, during and after, pointing to their vacillation, inaction, or wrong deeds.

Tactically, in those unions where the TUBs have little or no following and consistently oppose the interests of the masses, we continue their exposure in order to thoroughly isolate them and drive them out.

Within the trade unions, as in other mass organizations, communists use the fractional method of work.

These are our tasks as we see them in regards to the trade unions. We have made errors in the past and will probably make more in the future, but we feel that our line represents a Marxist-Leninist line that we implement, sum up, and share with the rest of the communist movement.

**BUILD FACTORY NUCLEI!
WIN THE ADVANCED TO COMMUNISM!**

NOTE 1: Our position on the trade union bureaucrats does not include all local union officials as automatically part of the TUB's. We believe that they must be judged on a case by case basis - if they are un-paid this is especially true. This also applies to shop stewards and committeemen etc.

NOTE 2: We want to say a few things briefly about our methodology in our work-place organizing. When we work at plants (and in fact in any situation) we always start our work by analyzing the objective and subjective factors at the plant. By objective factors we mean such things as: the size, nature, importance etc. of the plant itself; as well as the past history of spontaneous struggle. By subjective factor we mean: who and how many are the "leftists", sham and genuine communists, and what influence do they have there. Only by correctly assessing these are we able to determine the main and secondary manifestations of the principal contradiction and carry out a correct strategy and tactics for that particular situation. The principal contradiction is between the capitalist and the workers; but it is manifested differently in different work places. In some, speed-up or forced overtime may be the main manifestations; in others, unsafe and unhealthy conditions; in still others, racial discrimination, etc. If we don't grasp the particularity of the principal contradiction in each particular place where we are organizing we will never be able to correctly respond to and lead the struggle of the masses there in a planned and conscious manner.

We join or build struggles based on this analysis. We use various forms in our work including: leaflets and shop newspapers (aimed mostly at the intermediates and the lower strata - mainly political agitation, with much propaganda aimed at the masses and also some economic agitation). We supplement this/ combine this with propaganda work with the advanced, winning them to the science through work/study groups (similar to cores). We help build and participate in caucuses etc.

NOTE 3: We will be summing up our actual organizing experience in a separate article.

ADDITIONAL READINGS: On "Unite To Expose" - "Anglo-Russian Unity Comm." - Stalin (in On the Opposition) and "Left-Wing Communism..." - Lenin. also: "Reformist and Revisionist Trade Unions in the Service of the Bourgeoisie" - Filip Kota (Albania Today, 1 (20), 1975).