

REPORT ON UAW CONVENTION

April 22, 1946

Dear Comrades:

You have already received, over the signature of Comrade Shachtman, a report of the political discussions which took place in the Political Committee around the programmatic questions in connection with the UAW convention. This is a report on certain aspects of the convention itself not considered in Comrade Shachtman's report.

The UAW convention convened after several important and significant events had transpired in the labor movement. There was the long GM strike and the Ford-Chrysler negotiations. As you know these were not isolated events in the labor movement but were integrally connected in a sense, with the strike activity and negotiations of other CIO unions.

The events of outstanding importance in relation to all of this activity of the organized workers, was the emergence of Reuther with a program, containing some demands never before advanced in the labor movement. This program with the attendant publicity in the capitalist press, the opposition to the program expressed by many top leaders of the CIO and the acceptance of the program by many of the leading militants in the secondary ranks of the UAW indicated that Reuther would be an outstanding figure at the convention. That the GM program would be the main programmatic theme around which the convention would revolve was indicated by events which transpired before the convening of the convention. This was expressed by the demand of a group of local presidents that Reuther become a candidate for president of the UAW. On the surface it may have appeared that the move to make Reuther president was nothing more than the expression of a long-felt desire to get rid of R.J. Thomas. A careful examination of what happened at the convention however, must lead to a rejection of this notion, despite the fact that many of the outward manifestations would lead to this impression.

It was noticeable on the first day of the convention where the main interest of the delegates lay. Every delegate was intensely interested in the struggle which they knew would take place around the issue of the election for president.

One unique feature of the UAW is the open existence of caucuses and the manner in which the caucuses functioned at the last convention. The Reuther caucus met on the second day of the convention. It was at this caucus that Reuther was "drafted" for president. In his "acceptance speech" he made no mention of his program except by some general and vague expressions concerning the necessity for a positive and not a negative leadership. On the next night what was called the "Addes caucus" met. Thomas appeared at this meeting as an invited guest, the assumption being that Thomas himself had no caucus. The Addes caucus was a bloc between the Stalinists, non-Stalinist Thomas supporters, and other anti-Reutherites. The overwhelming majority of the Negro delegates were members of the Addes-Thomas-Stalinist caucus.

As far as the existence of a viewpoint was concerned, the Addes caucus was pretty much of a mud-slinging affair conducted in the most vicious manner. There was a recurrent play on words in connection with the G.M. "Open the Books" slogan. The slogan was kicked around in the most vicious and impermissible manner.

On the night before the elections the two caucuses met. It was at this meeting in which Reuther announced his program and discussed the program in detail; with one notable exception; he devoted only a few vague sentences to the question of independent political action. This part of his report could not even be called discussion of this important point.

The Thomas-Addes-Stalinist caucus, the same night, was a repetition of what had gone before with the addition of considerable inane clowning by Thomas and bombastic speeches by Stalinist hacks.

It is important to emphasize, because many of the militants did not understand it themselves, that the caucuses were in a significant sense a part of the convention. Important questions which were not discussed on the convention floor were discussed in the caucuses. This does not mean that the caucuses were models of democracy nor that the discussion which took place in them were adequate. This, of course, was not the case. It would have been far better if the important questions which were taken up in the caucuses had been brought into the convention and fought out there in the open.

The G.M. program was in fact the real issue. Discussion on it was veiled and muffled. The program and Reuther's procedure in calling the strike were ridiculed and adversely criticized by the Addes-Thomas-Stalinist bloc. Many important aspects of the program were either dodged or ignored by Reuther himself. But throughout the week it was clear that no matter how the G.M. program was approached and handled, this program was in fact what the shouting was all about. The blatant and demagogical mouthings of the Thomas-Addes-Stalinist bloc about being supporters of Phil Murray and the CIO program was really an attempt to dodge coming face to face with the G.M. program and its implications. Reuther's soft pedaling of the real content of the G.M. program was an opportunist procedure on his part calculated to avoid alienating delegates who would vote for him and an attempt not to appear too radical.

Many of the militants were disappointed with the convention. These militants failed to grasp what was taking place and why. They did not understand that the convention was faced with really big political questions which neither the union leadership nor the militants were qualified to face and openly carry on a struggle around. Many militants compared this convention with the 1944 convention, awarding greater significance to the 1944 meeting. They did not understand the tremendous difference between the two conventions, a difference based on a difference in the issues involved. The difference can be stated as follows: no-strike pledge in 1944-combined wages, prices and profits in 1946. Failure to recognize the temporary retentialities of the main fight in 1944 over against the revolutionary implications of the G.M. program in 1946 was the source of the confusion in the minds of dissatisfied delegates at the 1946 convention.

Any analysis of the UAW convention must include a frank and open discussion of our party and its place in the labor movement today. The whole strike wave of 1946 can be used to illustrate the situation in which the party finds itself. The fact that we had three delegates and one alternate in an important convention where there were nearly 2000 delegates should make every party member give

serious consideration to the meaning of what happened when the reconversion period came and to the meaning of the fact that our party was very late in getting into industry and in the unions.

Aside from our three delegates and one alternate we had around us and in our fraction meeting three or four militants and sympathizers. This was the quantitative extent of our representation as far as what could be called the party fraction.

We took a very realistic attitude toward our possibilities for doing anything in a practical, organizational or political way at the convention. This was a situation in which it was very, very clear that if the party is to have any effectiveness at all it must have forces, large forces; people, a lot of people in factories and in the unions. It was and will continue to be impossible to have any appreciable influence or effect, in such a convention, and under such conditions as prevailed at the UAW convention until our forces have been greatly increased.

The importance of this question of forces cannot and must not be underestimated. It is my guess that a minimum of 100 delegates would have been necessary to have real influence and to exert real pressure at the last UAW convention. This means, of course, that in order to have that many delegates our party would have to be much larger than it is today.

The plight of the Cannonites at the convention is an excellent illustration of what we are emphasizing here. The SWP had twelve delegates and a larger group of sympathizers. Despite their boasting that "we elected Emil Mazey", they were really impotent and this boast was only an infantile effort to hearten themselves. And they needed to hearten themselves because they had inflated their influence before the convention and had given the impression to their membership that they would play a real important role at the convention. For instance, they had announced that a membership meeting would be held in New York at which their delegates to the convention would report to the New York membership. About the fourth day of the convention we learned that they had called off the New York membership meeting; the reason being in words attributed to Cannon: "we haven't done a thing here."

The enormity of the failure of the SWP does not reside at all in the fact that they had only twelve delegates, but in the fact that they had pretended more of a following and more influence than they actually had and had indoctrinated their membership with the romantic notion that the SWP is a real and effective force in the UAW.

It is to our credit that we correctly appraised this situation in general, that we understood the quantitative aspects of the situation, that we understood and had publicized the significance of the G.M. program and that we understood our own limitations, as well as the limitations of the SWP.

We recruited a new member from the convention, an excellent militant from Muskegon, Michigan who was referred to us by a comrade in Muskegon. We distributed several thousand copies of LABOR ACTION and made some connections for future activity.

I wish to close this brief report with renewed emphasis on the lesson which we have learned again: that we must return to the factory, that we must stay there, that we must get into the unions and that we must stay in the unions.

Fraternally,

DC/CW

David Coolidge,  
National Organization Sec'y