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# What Shall We Do in the Unions?

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by Joseph Zack Kornfeder

["J.P. Collins"]

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## The Present Moment.

The period of crystallizing a Communist nucleus in each country; the period of struggle to win over the best amongst the class-conscious workers and organize them into a Communist Party; the inevitably ensuing struggle with the Centrists, yellow Socialists, and Syndicalists is nearing its end in most of the countries. The dominant problem of the new era is to wrest from the influence of the enemies of the proletarian revolution the broad masses of the working people.

The International Communist Party and especially its American section is going through a new metamorphosis; a new concentration of the militant proletarian vanguard is taking place. New concepts of struggle, new methods, new organizations are coming to life to serve the new needs — the broadening of the struggle.

In the United States the Communist Party is faced with a more difficult and diverse task than in any of the other countries. The workers in this country speak virtually all the languages of the world. Twenty-five nationalities are here in great numbers. The problem of reaching them in the various national groups and yet have one centralized party is, as far as the Communist Party is concerned, near its solution. But while the different nationalities are settled in their particular localities where they have developed their press and national organizations, and where we have established our spheres of influence, the labor unions are a mixture of all nationalities regardless of their understanding each other or not. This is a serious disadvantage to the revolutionary movement. Under this system the foreign language-speaking workers who are

likely to be the backbone of the revolutionary movement are prevented from gaining expression and their influence in the labor movement is thus reduced to a minimum. In some of the unions the foreign-born workers, due to their predominating numbers, have been able to gain expression, as for instance in the unions of the needle trades, textile workers, tobacco workers, miners, and metal workers. Amongst them we will find a distinct trend toward class action. IN other American unions where the nationalities are more evenly intermixed and where no particular nationality has predominance the grafting bureaucracy has maintained itself more successfully.

## Our Labor Movement.

The reactionary aspect of the American labor movement is not, however, entirely due to the many nationalities, the economic history of the country, or the different languages. The intricacies of the machinery of the AF of L, the policy of deliberate exclusion adopted toward the most exploited sections of the workers in this country (negroes, unskilled, etc.), the antiquated craft union form of organization and craft union method of waging struggles, the intricate system of electing officials and delegates to central bodies and conventions, the deceptive and tricky constitutions of the unions, the high initiation fees — all serve the purpose of fortifying the grafters in power and perpetuating their regime in the American labor movement.

In the European countries the labor movement has at least a political aspect to the extent that it generally recognizes the class struggle. But in this country

we have the most important unions controlled by the reactionaries. These unions being veritable job-trusts, the leaders consider it their prime function to keep the workers under their thumb. The labor movement in this country could properly be classified as follows:

(1) Unions organized by the bosses. There are many of them all over the country. These usually come into existence after a lost strike or when the workers crave for organization. This condition seriously hampers the reorganization of bona fide unions or the organization of new ones.

(2) Unions looked upon with no disfavor by exploiters, like the Railroad Brotherhoods. The representatives of the workers in these unions are usually of the sort approved by the bosses. The fact that the railroad workers are among the lowest paid despite being almost solidly organized shows how profitable this condition is to the exploiters.

(3) Radical and trade unions of various shades, as for example, the UMW, ILGWU, ACW, AMW, AF of I, and IWW.

### The Road Ahead.

Upon the Communist Party of America as the best organized radical faction in the field falls the task of invigorating the labor movement and raising its militancy. To achieve this we must strive: (1) to raise by all means the general level of class consciousness among the American workers; (2) to break down the barriers against the unskilled, the negroes, etc.; (3) to gain the maximum expression for the more revolutionary element amongst labor, particularly the foreign workers; (4) to bring about the constructive participation of all revolutionary elements in labor union affairs; (5) to bring about the reorganization of the labor movement on industrial lines, on the basis of shops and factories; (6) to democratize the labor unions through rank and file committees and the delegate form of union management; and last, but not least (7) to bring about the reduction of initiation fees in order to bring into the unions more rapidly a bigger mass of the most exploited workers.

To achieve this program, which is absolutely necessary for broader forms of struggle, we must bring into action more than Party members. It is our task as Communists to take the initiative and general leader-

ship and rally around ourselves all those who agree and sympathize with our program. Who can deny that aside from 300,000 sympathizers who read our press there are twice that many who wholeheartedly subscribe to our trade union program? The party must be a party of action. But it can only become so if the membership gains actual experience in activities amongst the workers. The days when mere attendance at group meetings and occasional leaflet distribution was considered sufficient are over. Every member who is eligible must join a labor union. Those that cannot join a labor union must join the workers' organization in their territory. *Every member must serve as a link between the Party and the masses.*

The strength of the party is to be found in its participation in the everyday life of the masses and in its fighting for their interests at every step. Those that shirk this duty only render lip service to Communism. They are a dead weight on the Party.

### Our Immediate Tasks.

Only those amongst us who have been in the forefront in attempts to establish contact with the masses can fully realize how impotent and unfit our present machinery and old methods (even our higher committees) are to accomplish this task. Indeed, we are facing a new era. Before we are through reorganizing and readjusting our forces we will have a live, virile party and a party mechanism so constructed as really to enable us to effectively participate and give actual, practical direction to the struggles of the workers in this country. Our foreign language-speaking comrades have unconsciously been maintaining an attitude of aloofness from the practical problems of the class struggle in this country. Theirs was a philosophy of controlling the so-called "backward" English-speaking element, on the assumption that the "foreigner" cannot play any important role in the class struggle in this country. When it came to work among the masses they maintained an attitude of "it's up to the Americans." They have confined themselves primarily to problems of control peculiar to the affairs of their particular nationalities instead of to their press, their organizations, their carrying out of the Party's immediate tasks among the workers, and the studying of their problems from the point of view of establishing con-

tact with the broadest masses of their own nationality.

As far as the problems of the proletariat are concerned in this country, there are no foreigners; there are only workers. The Party's immediate as well as ultimate program must become a factor among all of them no matter what tongue they speak so that each nationality in its own way may contribute to the realization of our program in our varied fields of activity. The aloofness of our foreign language-speaking comrades towards our labor union and industrial work has been almost complete. No one will deny that today the bulk of the American organized labor movement is composed of workers of foreign birth. Until the great majority of our membership — which is foreign — gets behind our labor union program in dead earnest, little will be accomplished. We have over 800 members working in the coal mining industry, about that many in the steel industry, with still more in the needle and textile industries, together with thousands of sympathizers in each trade. They are mostly of Russian or foreign extraction as well as Hungarians, Germans, and Poles. None of the Language Bureaus, with the exception of the Jewish [Yiddish], have made any attempt to organize them or even to educate them to a better understanding of our task and duty toward the labor movement. One of our first tasks therefore must be to bring our foreign language-speaking comrades into line for this work. We must organize the influence of the foreign language-speaking workers in the labor movement and give it maximum expression.

This can be done by organizing language-speaking nuclei along practically the same lines as all nuclei are organized, either according to industries or trade or, if there are sufficient numbers, according to local unions. Russian miners should be placed in Russian miners' nuclei, Polish workers into Polish nuclei, etc. They shall be connected with all the other language or English nuclei in their trade union or industries. Each of the language nuclei should organize the sympathizers in its language. We must get together the workers of these nationalities in their industries whenever it is necessary to put across our propositions in the labor unions. We should make the foreign worker an organized factor in the labor movement. He will then be the very backbone of a strong Left Wing in the labor movement which will go with us through thick and thin.

### **Sympathizers.**

The importance and the possibility of using communist sympathizers to aid us in our struggle is generally underestimated by most of our comrades. The wonderful success of our French comrades in the French Confederation of Labor and the resulting tremendous influence on the labor movement in France is largely due to a skillful use of sympathizers. In a comparatively short time our French comrades got the majority in the French Railroad Federation (the yellows stealing the treasury). At the recent congress of the French Federation of Labor the reactionaries only obtained a small majority, despite the expulsion of many radical locals. Especially in this country where the labor movement is so backward and the radical forces as yet impotent, is the question of clearly understanding how to approach and use sympathizers extremely important.

There are principally four sorts of sympathizers: (1) the communist sympathizer, those workers who agree with the main points of our program; (2) the revolutionary syndicalists; (3) the Left Socialist element; (4) the anarchists. In this country, due to the backwardness of many sections of the labor movement, even less conscious elements than the above mentioned could be used to great advantage on many occasions. There are the progressives, the One Big Unionists, and socialistic workers in general. These various shades of sympathizers with the cause of social revolution are especially important in view of the fact that the great percentage of our membership is totally inexperienced and at the present time unable to do much effective work amongst the masses. Moreover, our present trade union program, due to the backwardness of the American labor movement, must be of such a simple and elementary nature as to offer a logical basis for uniting all the elements above enumerated. They are to carry the burden of the struggle for a change in the labor movement. But we are to lend initiative and persistency.

### **Syndicalists.**

By far the most important factor in influencing a great number of radical workers whom we must win over to our point of view will be the syndicalists, rep-

resented in this country by the IWW. They are still far apart from us in tactics. The tactical differences can by no means be overlooked and an intense struggle against the present leadership must be carried on. The IWW claims that there are many millions more who can be organized among the unskilled. On this claim they base the theory that a strong job-controlling IWW can be built. Many years of costly experience and patent failure prove that the mass of workers rally around the existing big labor bodies like the AF of L, which offers them tangible prospects of bettering their immediate conditions. Thus we have in the UMW and others more unskilled workers than 20 times the membership of the IWW. It is Utopian to imagine that a small body of 30,000 without any job control, hounded, persecuted, and ostracized by the enemy press, could attract the big mass in preference to the well established, well financed, and recognized trade unions.

The only way for the IWW's functioning effectively is to work as a minority within the organized labor movement, not by worshipping three letters but by doing everything to put across their program. With those elements of the IWW that are mainly concerned about their program we are already cooperating effectively, and they have shown themselves to be splendid fighters. Those, however, who, through their dual unionism agitation demoralize and take the radical and militant element out of the trade unions must be fought most bitterly. Theirs are tactics that strengthen the enemy; tactics that separate the militant minority from the bulk of the masses and deliver the latter to the influence and domination of the labor fakers. At this moment it is the latter type that is on top in the IWW. Had those who went to jail been in the field, the IWW today would work hand in hand with all other revolutionary forces — the same as in England, where all wobblies are in the Rank and File movement within the British unions and shops; the same as in France, where the rebel wobblies fight side by side with the Communists and anarchists in order to rid the French syndicalists of the dominant reactionaries; the same as in Australia, Spain, and other countries.

Thus we see that in almost all countries where rebel unionists are organized they do not separate themselves into small dual unions, which are condemned to remain forever small, isolated propaganda groups, but plant their flag and organize themselves within

the camp of the enemy, fight the encroachments of the reactionaries, and offer a new leadership to the masses. More than one organization that was right in principle went on the rocks because of wrong tactics. The official IWW leaders who, during this period of ferment in the labor movement, when every rebel within a union is of immeasurable value to the revolutionary cause, appeal to the radicals to withdraw, to leave the masses individually or in groups for the sake of gaining a few dues paying members, are guilty of the worst crime against the American labor movement — against the whole working class.

### **The Anarchists.**

The anarchists' little groups, which operate in many places without being recognized as such, are another section which we have to take into consideration. We have already, especially among the Italians, won over many of their fighters. They generally agree on the question of rank and file control, the struggle against the bureaucracy, and the destruction of capitalism. Their lawlessness and individualism, however, coupled with the vague idealism with which they surround themselves, are very dangerous in effect upon proletarian discipline and solidarity in action. The futility of individual, decentralized action and the impossibility of educating the overwhelming bulk of the workers under capitalism can be clearly seen by all except the parlor anarchist. Unfortunately the parlor anarchist plays an important role in the dissemination of these doctrines which, if carried into effect, would paralyze into helplessness the working class movement and shatter it into thousands of disjointed, isolated groups unable to act concertedly. The bourgeoisie foster anarchistic individualism amongst the working class. The lack of solidarity and discipline, the autonomous and disjointed craft unions instead of big mass organizations, are in part due to the influence of this propaganda. The proletarian anarchists, once convinced of the necessity of discipline and centralization, are among the best and most consistent fighters against capitalism. At any rate, if we cannot bring them to agree fully with us, we should work hand in hand with them as much as can be done — especially in the labor movement.

As to the revolutionary or near-revolutionary

workers who more or less already agree with us or whose minds are not imbued with any particular doctrine of the class struggle, a patient, friendly attitude will go a long way in criticizing their shortcomings.

### **Mass Issues.**

A virile Communist Party worthy of its name must not only strive to absorb and direct the forces that consciously move against capitalism but must also use these forces to bring into action the broad masses of workers. In the United States the CP is the only solid, live organized force in the field which, with the proper analysis of the situation and the proper application of the tactics adopted by the 3rd Congress of the CI [June 22-July 12, 1921], can give leadership and direct the great discontented masses into definite revolutionary channels. The situation in the AF of L is very tense. A great industrial crisis is gripping the country. Are we capable of fulfilling the task of a Communist Party? Are we ready to participate in the class struggle in the way that American conditions demand? The Third International bids us to reach the masses and not to bury ourselves, not run away from them, but to depart from our old erroneous methods. The Russian comrades yearn for support from this country in the form of working class action. Are we going to plunge into another period of internal strife or are we going to seize this opportunity to make a powerful communist mass movement?

The economic world crisis has reached America and it is this crisis that will test the CP of A. American capital, in order to dominate the world, is out to lower the standard of living of the workers to a level approaching as nearly as possible that existing in other industrially developed countries. In order to do this they must first destroy all the defenses of the working class, especially the trade unions. The Open Shop drive is a part of the long-drawn, persistent struggle against the workers. In this country the factories are closing down steadily and the number of unemployed having reached 6 million, is still rising, but in Germany industries are "booming." They are booming because the workers' standard of living in Germany has been reduced to the starvation level. Therefore, some American and English capitalists are placing their contracts in Germany, which is manufacturing goods and building ships for them at a cheap labor cost. They will continue to do so until the workers of America have been made to submit completely to the new slavery. In view of these facts, the fight to maintain the union shop, the fight to maintain the standard of wages and hours now becomes a revolutionary fight. We must make it our fight and under its banner we shall develop a powerful movement. Only by properly using the issues that stir the masses will we be able to accomplish this and organize the sympathizers behind us, thus developing a new leadership, a new organ ready to lead the working class towards mass and class action.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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