

Some Concepts of Our Trade-Union Work

By Hal Simon

A TRADE-UNION POLICY that is worthy of the name Marxist-Leninist must be a policy that will help our Party to end its isolation in the labor movement of our country. In spite of the constant attacks against our Party, the many struggles that the workers are carrying on, the tremendous battles of the Negro people, signify that "objective situations," do not rule out the ending of our isolation. On the contrary, with an approach that is soundly based, we should be able to make a modest, but consistent and important contribution to these struggles. On such a basis we will be able to make progress towards ending that harmful isolation.

There has been too little fresh thinking on this problem. However, where new approaches are developed, many of them have come under fire from some comrades, (including leading ones) as "anti-Leninist." Such is the case, for example, with respect to the material published with regard to trade union problems in issue No. 3 of the National Discussion Bulletin.

In our opinion the shoe is on the other foot. We feel that the published material, notwithstanding weaknesses it may contain, is imbued with, and defends, a genuine Marxist-Leninist approach as against a sectarian, DeLeonist kind of think-

ing which has time and again contributed heavily to our isolation over the years, and threatens to do so again.

We wish, without challenge to the integrity of working-class devotion of those comrades with whom we disagree, to dispute such views, some of which we have shared in the past. We wish to do so within the framework of discussing practical trade-union policies and problems before us. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to deal with the opinion that in trade-union matters, the published material of the labor sub-committee "manufactures or exaggerates" Party errors in this field during the past.

THE PARTY'S ERRORS

No one will dispute the serious objective difficulties of the post-war period, the intensity of the attacks against our Party. But just because we agree, we cannot understand a refusal to face up to the errors in policy and tactics that *ignored the objective situation* and based itself on over-exaggerated estimates of the strength of the Left. This resulted in repeated exhortations to the relatively small number of Left-led unions and Left forces in shops to be more aggressive, more bold, more militant, to stand up and "be count-

ed," regardless of consequences.

Anyone who knows Detroit and Toledo, Youngstown and Pittsburgh, Chicago and Cleveland, knows that in these and other towns and cities which constitute the industrial heartland of America, you will find the wreckage of comrades, former comrades and Party clubs isolated as a consequence of *direct catastrophic sectarian errors* for which we were responsible.

The tragedy is that following the Draft Resolution on the 1952 elections, when we began to correct some of our thinking on the approach to trade-union problems, we no longer had sufficient membership in the shops or positions of leadership in unions to make all the drastic changes required.

It was Left-sectarian errors of this type, that contributed to the split in the CIO in 1949. In practice, we made acceptance of our position on political questions the minimum basis for united front in the period prior to 1949. As a consequence, even though we tried to change when we finally realized that the dominant forces in the leadership were moving towards a split, again it was too little and too late.

Fundamental errors in judgment were also made on the question of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. merger. We were told (when the merger agreement was announced in February 1955), that one of the main reasons for the merger was, "A belief on the part of reactionary forces that if the workers can all be combined under one head, it will be much easier to cramp them

into the service of American imperialism's war-like foreign policy." (Wm. Z. Foster—*Daily Worker*, Feb. 16, 1955). This dubious point of view that inferred the merger was really instigated by the State Department, *held our Party back* at a time when it should have been enthusiastically working, (even with its limited capacity), to contribute to this historic event, this forward step in the direction of American trade-union unity.

We rather doubt that a trade-union activist can be found who will not agree that we have made most serious and extremely costly sectarian errors. What causes our deepest concern is that this charge of "manufacture or exaggeration" of errors really means, when you get to the bottom of it, a refusal to *admit* that these were mistaken policies. That concern is sharper when we examine the approach of these same comrades to our current trade-union problems. For we find on the part of those entertaining this view, a continuation of the same wrong policies.

THE LABOR MOVEMENT TODAY

Let us proceed to cases, taking first the question: how shall we estimate the American labor movement today? It is obvious that the answer to this question underlies all other policies and tactics.

The charge is made that the Trade-Union Material is "complacent" about the "alleged political independence" of the unions, rather

than recognizing that they are dominated by capitalist influence, and that therefore, our task is to help the trade unions achieve real ideological and organizational independence. In addition, it is said that this material is too apologetic towards the leaders of the labor movement and weakens the Leninist conception that they are "lieutenants of the capitalists" in the ranks of the workers.

In the most general sense, some of this is of course historically true. But when this is all that is said and general historic statements are made the bases for day-to-day tactics, *the advice that it offers to our working-class comrades is that the main enemy they face is the labor leadership.*

It is quite true that the workers are heavily influenced by the sweep of propaganda that is drummed into their ears from morning to night. It re-inforces their belief in capitalism and insulates them from any willingness to consider a Socialist outlook. This continuing support for and belief in capitalism is further encouraged by the fact that as far as they can see, they have been able to improve their economic conditions without any lessening of support for capitalism. They do not feel that they are *forced* to accept capitalism. They *agree* with it. This is the level of their thinking at the present time. We must hasten to add, however, that the workers have not made their support for capitalism a barrier to the struggle against their employers to improve and extend their economic conditions. This is of course

the main question, the one upon which we must base our tactics for the present and from which the working class can be helped to seek out the proper path for the future.

To repeat Lenin's support in 1920 for DeLeon's phrase calling the trade-union leaders, "Lieutenants of the capitalists in the ranks of the workers," as a fundamental clue to trade-union tactics and strategy in the U.S.A. today, is far from helpful. There are quite a few changes that have taken place, changes of a kind which Lenin always taught must be taken into account. For otherwise we are being given DeLeonism in 1957, not Leninism.

The approach of the Trade Union Material stresses an appreciation of the strength, the potential, and every sign of growing independence by A.F.L.-C.I.O. The material stresses a most positive approach to the gains already achieved through A.F.L.-C.I.O. unity, and the greater achievements still ahead, in winning better wages and working conditions, meeting the problems of automation, advancing Negro-white unity, organizing the unorganized, especially in the South, and moving towards genuine independence politically.

We feel that a stress of this kind is absolutely necessary because we have a continuing job of ridding ourselves of a sectarian, "holier-than-thou" attitude on our part which has so bitterly estranged us from millions of workers. We feel that a stress of this kind is necessary because we find such an approach attacked as "un-Marxist" and "anti-Leninist," and

behind that we feel is a *policy* of continuing sectarianism.

The characteristic of the American Socialists of the 1880's, their sectarian isolation from the labor movement, still plagues us today. Marx and Engels argued sharply at that time, as Lenin noted particularly: "They [the socialists in America] are incapable of adapting themselves to the theoretically helpless, but living, powerful, mass labor movement marching past them."

Is not this comment precisely applicable to our situation today? Is there not a labor movement that is living and powerful, far beyond previous levels and at the same time theoretically weak? Are we not isolated from it and in it? And are we not receiving advice and warnings from some comrades stressing the "class collaborationist" thinking in this labor movement, the "capitalist-lieutenant" character of the leadership, the lack of "independence" of the movement? Meanwhile, *it marches past us!*

The Trade-Union Material tries to place central emphasis on the importance of working with the rank and file of labor in the development of struggle around the many valid demands of A.F.L.-C.I.O., some of which, like the shorter-hours demand, are far-reaching in character. The Trade Union Material tries to center attention not on pigeon-holing labor leaders as "Left," "Right," "Center," but on the fact that the way to move and influence the direction of leadership is through the movement of the rank and file.

We should condemn that past practice which has tried (in vain) to assign permanent pigeon-holes for trade-union leaders. In addition, we used to set forth our position not only in terms of expressing our differences, but also by calling them "renegades," "fascist-minded," and a host of other names. This practice only resulted in making *us* seem on later occasions to be the most unprincipled and conscienceless people, flip-flopping into seeking united front relations with some of the objects of our vilification.

We ought to drop this habit suitable to an embittered and isolated sect, especially if we hold to the view that vast changes have opened in the world and that new relations are possible. We ought to reject that caricature of Marxism-Leninism which rips quotations out of Lenin's writing at the time of the Russian revolution. At that time he excoriated labor opportunists who constituted the *main danger* during the *sharp revolutionary advance* of the workers. It is a caricature of Leninism to apply such quotations to the American labor movement and the American scene in 1957.

At that, Lenin's general revolutionary principle, that which is of *universal validity*, dictated the seeking out at all times of every possible ally, no matter how temporary, vacillating or unstable. May Heaven (and a true reading of Lenin) give us the skill to apply that great principle, for indeed we have need of it!

In 1920, at a time when the world

still smoked of revolution, Lenin nevertheless scored, in his "*Left-Wing*" *Communism, An Infantile Disorder*, that trend in various countries which declared the incorrectness and "impossibility" of working in the Right-wing and "reformist" unions and people's organizations. He warned that the worst mistake Communists could make was to substitute their own desires for objective realities, to mistake what was obsolete for them as already obsolete for the workers, for the masses.

Here again, is a Leninist principle of universal validity. Yet one comrade insisted that the *Trade-Union Material* handled altogether incorrectly the question of class collaboration, "brushing aside" our "fighting policy" on this question, etc. Of course those who read the *Trade-Union Material* will find that it plainly sets forth our class struggle policy as against a class collaboration policy. But the *Trade-Union Material* handles this on the basis that most American workers, while they have a readiness to fight for their demands, do *not* extend this to acceptance of our basic "class struggle" view. The labor leadership is plainly class collaborationist, and their type of leadership is, unfortunately, not now under threat from any energetic rejection of their views by the membership.

Class collaboration is obsolete for us, but it is far from obsolete for the American labor movement. Recognizing that, the approach of the *Trade-Union Material* is to stress

that differences of view on this broad social question need not at all divide those who are agreed on the necessity for the big and important struggles at hand. We make clear our different view, but within the framework of a basis for unity and struggle.

The only real effect of the kind of approach suggested by the above-mentioned comrade would be to direct our central fire against the labor leadership as "class collaborationist," and to do so at a moment when they appear before the workers as standing (willingly or no) at the head of actual struggles. And if we fall into this way of demonstrating our "differences," we shall stand before the workers as convicted of the charge of being disrupters, "borers-from-within," interested only in our partisan aims! We must protest against the assignment of the name "Leninist" to such a policy. It is a policy which dares not recommend that we stay *outside* of the trade unions, but does suggest that *we work within the trade unions as outsiders*.

Without question, the handling of the question of "class struggle" as against "class collaboration," and of a number of other questions in the *Trade-Union Material*, could stand considerable sharpening and improvement. But we believe the way in which the question is approached is correct, that it provides a basis for improved work and improved relations on the part of our trade-union comrades.

THE "LEFT-CENTER" CONCEPT

In the opinion of one leader of our Party, it is the greatest practical weakness of the Trade-Union Material that it recommends a re-examination of the tactic of "Left-Center" unity. It is correct that the Trade-Union Material does so, suggesting that this is a "frozen political geography" which is devoid of real meaning and helpfulness in the situation before us. To be sure, those who insist on the past method of expounding this conception have admitted difficulty in defining who is "Left," who is "Right," who is "Center" at this time. For one thing, the situation is fluid in the labor movement. For another, having called the various conservative leaders "lieutenants of capitalism," and the various Social Democratic leaders "traitors" and "renegades," even more dangerous than the former, the difficulty of inventing a "center" becomes obvious.

We ought to re-examine the entire question of how we have used the "Left-center" conception as the explanation for our past trade-union achievements. Off-hand, it is very well known that not only did these "lines of division" set up by us "a priori" continuously shift (Brother X was a "Right" one year, a "Center" next, then a "Left," then back way over "Right" again) but it is also true that our categorizing of individuals often served to *hinder* new alignments, or in some instances to drive a bad situation to extremes. It might perhaps be helpful also to

consider for a moment how it looked to the workers and the leadership of the labor movement when we arrogated to ourselves the omniscience of deciding who was in paradise, who in limbo, and who in hell.

In any case, for the situation we face in the labor movement today, and for the tasks ahead, to continue using these "Left," "Right," and "Center" conceptions as we have in the past, can only work harm. Should we not apply ourselves to thinking over deeply the significant statement made by Marx and Engels over 100 years ago in the *Communist Manifesto*: "They [the Communists] do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement."

The comrades who hold some of these sectarian concepts should explain how they see the relation of the labor movement to the perspective outlined in the Draft Resolution for building an anti-monopoly coalition.

If an anti-monopoly coalition is to have any meaning, the heart of that coalition must be the labor movement. If the labor movement is the most important ingredient of this coalition then it will only fulfill that role if major sections of the union leadership, under pressure of the workers, becomes a part of their movement. For the workers will not participate without their leaders.

The Draft Resolution describes the anti-monopoly coalition as being

based on the united struggles of the workers, farmers, small business and professionals, "who suffer directly from the exploitation and depredations of Big Business." It does *not* say only the Left forces in each grouping should work together. It does project an all-embracing multi-class unity against a common enemy—the monopolies.

But these same comrades who say they support this strategic aim of the resolution reject a concept of a struggle for all-embracing unity around specific issues within the labor movement. They are so weighted down by their desire to label the trade-union leaders and stuff them into pre-fabricated compartments that they can only see the labor movement becoming a part of the coalition if its present leadership is defeated and eliminated. This view rejects or refuses to recognize what progress the workers have been able to make even with the present leadership. More than that it consigns the whole concept of an anti-monopoly coalition far and away to the dimly lit future and destroys its meaning.

To make this point is not to deny that there are differences among the trade-union leaders. In fact the Trade-Union Material describes these differences at some length. Undoubtedly as the struggle of the workers develops, greater differentiations will develop and some leaders may be replaced. What is new and what experience has shown is, that on a number of occasions and

under pressure of the workers the present leaders of various persuasions can work together, and with other sections of the people. This is part of what gives us confidence that the labor movement can be the decisive sector of an anti-monopoly coalition.

Nor do we wish to understate the particular role of the most progressive and Left forces in the unions. Theirs is the task of helping to unite the rank and file, of fighting to bring to life the stated policies of the union. In the course of such activity, the Left forces will grow in numbers and strength.

TO OVERCOME ISOLATION

The biggest problem that confronts our working-class comrades, in fact the Party as a whole, is how to overcome our isolation from the labor movement. Some comrades confuse their individual participation in a shop or local union with the question of involvement of the Party as such. But this is not the same thing. Our *Party* is isolated and it is no longer recognized by any significant sector of the workers as a valid force in the labor movement. This is true in spite of our many heroic struggles and important past contributions. The problem then is how to get out of this box.

It should be apparent that there is no short cut. We should recognize that we have a long road to travel to re-establish even a minimum status in the eyes of the workers.

However, we will make no progress unless we are prepared to discard sectarian policies, concepts and habits that in the past contributed to our isolation. We need a clear re-assessment of the status of the American trade-union movement. We need greater clarity on the relation between the Party and the unions, as well as the particular tasks of the Party.

It should be of some significance that the comrades who adhere to past discredited concepts are unable to discuss this problem at all. They are seemingly unconcerned with how we are going to begin to break with our isolation *today*. Their outlook seems to be that all we have to do is to repeat by rote certain general historic shibboleths, and try to hold a few stalwarts together while waiting for the inevitable economic crisis to develop. At that time, they presume, the workers will come flocking to our banners and we will put an end to capitalism in our country.

This is the dream of a discredited sect and not of a Party based on the teachings of scientific socialism.

The task of our Party *now* in the labor movement *today* is to contribute, to the limit of our capacity, to the broadest unity of the workers in the daily struggle to advance their wages and working conditions. To leave it at that, however, would not differentiate our Party members from other progressive and militant workers.

Our task therefore, basing our-

selves on our participation in these struggles, is to help to infuse that ingredient of consciousness that will help to give purpose and direction to these struggles; to help weld a firm anti-monopoly coalition.

We know that even this objective, as important as it is, falls short of answering the problems that the workers will increasingly face in this era of automation and atomic energy. Therefore, it is the constant task of our Party to outline what Socialism would mean for the American workers. Not Socialism as it has come about and developed in other countries as the model and blueprint for us. But Socialism as it will be in our country, supported by American workers who have the highest standard of living in the world and are determined to defend and advance those standards beyond the limits imposed by capitalist society.

As the Trade-Union Material states: "We reject any idea that our role is to stand at the end of the road and beckon." Our task is to get in there and to fight shoulder to shoulder with *everyone* who wants to procure something more for the workers. For it is only in this way that workers will come to understand the limitations of capitalism.

Giving ear to the demands of many workers, the AFL-CIO and various international unions have adopted comprehensive programs. As the Trade-Union Material points out, every part of these programs is not endorsed by all sections of the

leadership; some points are in fact opposed. Nonetheless, resolutions adopted by various bodies cover such questions as improvement in wages and working conditions, the shorter work week, organizing the unorganized, repeal of Taft-Hartley, opposition to State "Right-to-Work" laws, run-away shops, taxation, workmen's compensation, increased unemployment insurance and supplementary benefits, health and safety, housing, education, civil rights, anti-discrimination, women workers, Puerto Rican workers, against racketeering, children and youth, atomic energy, political action, Farmer-Labor unity, prices and profits, and last but not least foreign policy on which there are important debates and differences taking place. That is not all, there are many more.

However, while many trade-union leaders feel it necessary for a variety of reasons to adopt such resolutions, they do not feel under the same compulsion to undertake a struggle to achieve the objectives they contain. They fear to take the main step which would guarantee victory—the mobilization of the rank and file workers.

Herein lies a key to the particular role of our Party and other advanced class-conscious workers. It is to supply in a bold and constructive fashion, the same crusading spirit in the fight for labor's program today as we did in the days when we helped spark the organization of the CIO.

It will not be easy. Conditions in the labor movement today are vastly different from the middle thirties. Not only do trade union leaders tell workers, "leave everything to me"; but many workers are prepared to do just that when they feel that it involved questions that they do not see directly related to their wages and one-the-job conditions.

The task of our Party is to help to show the relation between the program and the direct economic conditions of the workers.

Our Party leadership has not been actively concerning itself with these questions. But it is only in relation to how we contribute to stimulating this kind of crusade, how we help to spark this kind of a movement that we can overcome our isolation. There is a need for popular pamphlets and other literature in which we could discuss such questions with workers. Forums, in which our point of view, together with others, could be placed would be attractive to many socialist-minded workers.

There is no detailed blue-print that can be sketched to fit each and every local union. What does apply to all is the need to divest ourselves of old self-isolating concepts and sectarian habits. Let us give free rein to seek out a fresh Marxist-Leninist working-class comrades in the shops to the profound initiative of our approach towards solving the problems of our isolation.