

Some Problems of Work in Right-Led Unions

By John Swift

This is the first of a two installment article. The concluding section will appear in the May issue.—Ed.

EVERY READER of *Political Affairs* is aware of the central and decisive importance of uniting the ranks of organized labor for peace and progress. Every reader will likewise agree that this cannot be accomplished without winning the workers in the present Right-wing led unions, for these constitute the overwhelming majority of the organized working class.

Yet awareness and agreement while essential, are not sufficient. Nor is it of any particular value to preach to the labor movement or to try to shame it by declamations and appeals. Such general appeals do little good and often considerable harm. For frequently one feels frustrated after reading articles that call upon labor to rise to the occasion, to do thus and so, to break from the war camp, to forge an alliance with the Negro people, to stop Red-baiting in its ranks, to break from the two-party system, etc. And this feeling of frustration arises from the knowledge that constantly haunts the worker-reader of the real state of affairs in the labor

movement, of the tremendously wide gap between what it *ought* to be and what it *is*.

The class-conscious worker sees the Left-wing and progressive unionists exerting their main influence and leadership over a number of independent unions with a total membership of something over a half-million. He sees these unions, however, physically separated and often isolated from the main sections of the labor movement. He sees the labor movement as a whole divided *within* itself and *against* itself, with the A. F. of L., C.I.O., and Railroad Brotherhoods led by men who, while they are considered labor spokesmen, are less the spokesmen of labor and more the spokesmen of Big Business in the ranks of labor.

Perplexed by this state of affairs, the class-conscious worker wants to see the *bridge* by which the gap between what is and what ought to be can be spanned. Without seeing this bridge, without being able to tread on it with a degree of confidence, he feels completely incapable of moving in the direction of concrete labor unity. Often this finds expression either in phrasemongering or in cynicism towards the working class,

both of which feed each other and lead to general passivity.

How are we going to get this labor unity so that the labor movement can play its progressive role? How are we going to get this labor unity, starting from what actually is, from the present relationship of forces within the organized working class, from the present level of working-class understanding, and not from wishful thinking? How?—that is the question.

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Before attempting to answer a few aspects of this question, it would be well to touch on the historical background of the problem of work in reformist-led trade unions. Obviously, this problem long predates our recent Party discussions of it. Specifically, the problem has an American as well as an international history.

Its American history goes back to the turn of the century when the rise of monopoly capital enabled the bourgeoisie to use its super-profits to bribe the upper stratum of the working class, thereby laying the economic basis for the victory of Gompersism in the labor movement. In answer to this opportunism an ultra-“Left” tendency arose which expressed itself in a disgust with the official labor movement and a withdrawal from it. As early as 1912, Comrade Foster, seeing the error of this ultra-“Left” policy and realizing that the organized workers were only being abandoned to the mercies

of the labor opportunists, fought for a policy of tireless and methodical work within the official labor movement. By his leadership and example, he proved that despite the Gomperses and Greens, it was possible to achieve important successes for the workers even within the Right-led A. F. of L. of that day.

In the early years of the world Communist movement, a number of young Communist Parties also developed an ultra-“Left” approach to the then existing Social-Democratic controlled labor unions. Seeing no perspective for work within these unions, the Communists withdrew, leaving them in the main to the opportunists. As early as 1920, Lenin, in his brilliant polemical booklet, *“Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, severely criticized these “Left” Communists, calling them “foolish,” and said that, “Greater stupidity, and greater damage . . . cannot be imagined!” (*Selected Works*, Vol. X, p. 95)

Since then, many things have changed. In France and Italy, for example, it is the Communists who today have the closest links with the labor movement. It is this which constitutes their great strength, while it is the Social-Democrats whose influence in the working class is steadily waning. Also, there are today no Communists in any part of the world who do not wish to be linked with the unions.

In our country, too, changes have taken place. The Communists do

have greater strength and influence in the labor movement. But the *primary*, the most important change of all that has taken place in this period of time, is that the great bulk of the industrial workers are now organized into trade unions. The labor movement has grown from approximately three million members in the 1920's to fourteen million today.

This is not merely a quantitative addition, for a quantitative change of this magnitude must inevitably carry with it important qualitative elements. In the first place, the industrial working class has in the main become trade union conscious. As we well know, trade-union consciousness remains still within the ideological framework of bourgeois consciousness—that is, it still accepts the capitalist system. But this in no way belittles the significance of this development, for trade-union consciousness represents an important step *forward*, represents movement and transition, and thereby approaches more closely to the nodal point from which the leap to mass class consciousness can take place.

Furthermore, the trade-union movement is no longer the privileged domain of a relatively small, highly skilled, labor aristocracy. Today it includes the great mass of the unskilled and semi-skilled workers in trustified industry.

Of great significance is the fact that for the first time hundreds of thousands of Negro workers are members of trade unions. This has

added a quality of militancy and of Negro-white unity, which, with all its present limitations and shortcomings, represents something new and something growing.

Often in our vexations at the relative ideological backwardness of the American working class, at its failure to break from capitalism, and at the fact that this mighty Gulliver stands hat in hand before the Lilliputian political pigmies of our day, we tend to overlook and even deprecate the historic significance of the *new* fact: that the bulk of the industrial workers are now members of class organizations.

Lenin, in 1920, considered it of extremely great importance that millions of workers in the West, were, as he put it, "*for the first time* passing from complete lack of organization to the lowest, most elementary, most simple, and (for those still thoroughly imbued with bourgeois-democratic prejudices) most easily accessible form of organization, namely, the trade unions." (*Selected Works*, Vol. X, p. 94)

And Stalin understood its special meaning for the United States, where for historic reasons the workers lagged far behind their European brothers, not only in general class consciousness, but even in the more elementary matter of trade-union organization. When an American trade-union delegation interviewed Stalin in 1927, he asked: "How do you account for the small percentage of American workers organized in

trade unions?" (*Leninism*, Vol. I, p. 389) The delegation had some difficulty in answering this question, but since then, the American workers themselves have provided the answer, not in words, but in organizational deeds.

The outstanding fact that emerges from all this is that, while the labor movement has now grown in size and organizational strength so that it could be a power in the land, it has not yet become a decisive political force, because it is still under reformist and Social-Democratic influence and leadership. If it were not for this fact, the whole situation in our country and the world would be different. For when American labor takes an independent political position, when it refuses to go along with the war policies of monopoly capital, when it starts to fight all-out for economic security, Negro rights and civil liberties, then the last stronghold of world imperialism begins to crumble and the danger of a new world war will fade from the earth.

That is why the work of winning the labor movement for these tasks assumes such vital urgency today.

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With this historical sketch as background, let us take up a few aspects of the question of how we are to move towards labor unity of action, starting not with what we should like to be, but with what actually is.

First, let us ask ourselves: What is the reason for our tendency to

neglect work in the reactionary-led trade unions? Why do we concentrate our primary attention upon those unions already under progressive leadership? One could, of course, answer by saying that a base of operations is always of great importance and should be consolidated. And this would be quite true. For there is much that still needs to be done to make this a firm and solid base. But then again, a base which becomes completely surrounded and hemmed in by the enemy will not long remain a base. For the very concept of a base is that it be a strong-point *from* which and not merely *in* which to operate.

Another answer could be that life is comparatively easier in unions where the progressives already have a majority, while it is far more difficult in unions where the Right-wing rules. This, too, is true but cannot explain the tendency under discussion. For the whole world knows that if there is anything that characterizes a Communist, it is his fearless, self-sacrificing devotion to the people, his staunchness in the face of the heaviest odds. After all, those who seek the "easier" path in the ultra-reactionary, witch-hunt-infested America of 1952 are not likely to be Communists. Therefore this answer, too, must be discarded; for it is a calumny against the valiant members of our Party.

There is another and more basic explanation for this weakness, and that is that our work in the reform-

ist-led unions frequently suffers from a lack of perspective and a wrong approach.

Of what does this lack of perspective and false approach consist? It consists of the tendency to view these Right-led unions rather one-sidedly and statically. We tend to see only their class collaboration side. In other words, we tend to see the reformist leadership but not the rank and file.

But the class collaboration policies of the union leadership represent only one side, and this is by no means the side that gives the union its basic class character. For these unions are not only instruments of class collaboration. They are first of all vehicles of the working class, the most elementary and basic mass organizations of the class. They are the means by which the working class defends itself from the economic encroachments of capital. And this is true, even where the unions are under Right-wing leadership.

Hence, every Right-led union has two sides to it: its elementary class struggle origin and nature, and its class collaboration policies and leadership. These two opposites exist side by side, interpenetrate each other, and express themselves in the contradiction between the strivings and needs of the rank and file, on the one hand, and the official policy and aims of the top leadership, on the other. This contradiction must in time be resolved in the interests of the workers and the class struggle, or be re-

solved in the opposite way, by the complete negation and destruction of the unions. And if there are some who think that trade unionism can no longer be wiped out in the United States, let them heed the voice of working-class experience which proves that, especially in periods of economic crisis, the bosses set their sights on destroying the trade unions. That the capitalist class has not given up this objective even today can be seen by the Taft-Hartley Law, the most onerous and most reactionary features of which will be utilized precisely at the moment when a mass reserve army of unemployed tends to lower labor's bargaining position. Also, let us not forget that the pre-Hitler German labor movement was far more powerful than ours, but still gave way to a fascist labor front. This is the logical outcome of class collaboration.

The failure to take into account the dual features of a Right-led union, unavoidably and inevitably must lead to serious errors in policy and tactical approach. To fail to see the class collaboration policies and leadership and to see only the class origin and character of reformist-led unions, is to veer towards gross Right opportunism which results in strengthening the current of class collaboration and consciously or unconsciously participating in selling out the workers.

On the other hand, to fail to see the class character of a union, to see

only the rotten reformist leaders and not the rank and file, is to veer towards "Left" sectarianism, which means seeing no perspective for work in these unions and isolating ourselves from them—even when we are members. And this, too, results in strengthening the labor fakers by a conscious or unconscious surrender to them.

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The fact that a Right-led union still is a working-class organization and engages in the class struggle explains the attitude of the rank and file workers towards their unions, often despite their leadership. That is why the workers view these unions as their own. That is why they defend them so vigorously. Even when under corrupt, gangster-ridden leadership, the workers try to distinguish between the union which they consider their own and the leadership which is foisted upon them.

Unless this psychology of the workers is understood, no real headway can be made in reactionary-led unions, which means no headway in the direction of labor's unity of action. Instead, a great deal of harm can be done.

It was Stalin who profoundly and simply explained the reasons for this attitude of the workers. Explaining what he called the "special feature of the situation in the West," as compared with that in old Czarist Russia, Stalin pointed out that in old Russia the trade unions arose and developed "after the Party was

formed, around the Party, and in amity with the Party." "Trade unions," he said, "did not yet exist in Russia when the Party and its organizations were already leading, not only the political, but also the economic struggles of the working class—even small and very small strikes. This, mainly, accounts for the exceptional prestige enjoyed by our Party among the workers before the February Revolution, as compared with the trade unions which existed here and there in an embryonic state."

"In Western Europe," Stalin continued, "the trade unions developed under totally different conditions. In the first place, the trade unions there were formed and underwent extensive development long before the working class parties came into existence. Secondly, instead of the trade unions growing up around the party of the working class, the parties of the working class emerged from the unions. Thirdly, as the field of industrial struggle, which is closest to the working class, was pre-empted, so to speak, by the trade unions, the political parties . . . were forced into the background."

Sharply criticizing those Communists who failed to grasp this truth, Stalin said: "They do not understand that, good or bad, the rank-and-file worker regards the trade unions as his citadels, his strongholds, which help him to maintain his wages, his working day and so forth." And concluding on this point, Stalin declared:

"He who fails to understand this characteristic feature in the mentality of the average worker in Europe will understand nothing about the present position of the Communist Parties." (J. Stalin, *Leninism*, I, pp. 158-60.)

Stalin was speaking of Europe in 1925, but how much validity this has for America of 1952! There can be no question but that "good or bad," the workers consider their unions as their "citadels." Especially is this true of the workers in the trustified industries, where the older generation still remembers the pre-union days of industrial serfdom. The union has given the workers a feeling of collective strength and class dignity. This is even more true of the Negro workers in trustified industry, who love their unions with a passion which flows from their status as doubly-exploited members of the working class, from their position as members of an oppressed people. The union to the Negro worker represents a bridgehead, narrow though it may be, to equality on the job, to Negro and white unity, and thus also to his people's ultimate freedom. That is why up and down the length and breadth of the land, there is not an industrial community in which Negroes work and have the right to union membership, where they are not also among the staunchest, most militant and most progressive fighters for their union.

It is this mentality of the workers toward their unions which explains why workers will gripe so much

about union bureaucracy, thereby often creating the impression that they are turning away from their union, but when the chips are down, when the union is under attack, they will rise overwhelmingly to its defense.

This was most graphically illustrated around the union-shop issue. Here the bosses thought they really had a question that would confuse and divide the workers. Yet when they put it to a test, the capitalists got the surprise of their lives. In more than four years since the Taft-Hartley slave law was passed, 5,547,478 workers cast valid ballots in government supervised union-shop elections. These took place in 46,119 different industrial shops in every state of the union. Furthermore, Taft and Hartley and their other Big Business Congressional cronies, weighted these elections against the unions by inserting a clause in the law making a majority vote for a union-shop insufficient for a union victory. The union had to get a majority, not only of those who voted, but of *all those eligible* to vote. The results showed 5,071,978 workers voted for the union shop. This was 91.4 percent of the valid ballots cast. Actually 97.1 percent of the elections went on record for the union shop!

We can see this same approach of the workers to the question of raiding. The main success of the raiders occurred under one of two circumstances: either when it was possible to confuse the workers into believing that the union itself had split down

the middle and that therefore a choice between two sides had to be made, or at the time when the progressive-led unions were not on the ballot because they had refused to sign the infamous Taft-Hartley 9H clause. In this latter case, many workers refused to take the chance of voting "No union," which was the only way they could have voted against the raiders. They feared, and with considerable justification, that a "No union" vote could lead exactly to that, namely—no union. And even if they opposed raiding, they wanted above everything else to be sure they would have a union, for even a "bad" union is better than no union.

Where once a vote was taken, even if it was very close, the workers as a general rule, slowly but surely drifted into the union that had won the election. Here, too, they often put their likes and dislikes aside in order to guarantee that, come what may, they would have a union in which the *majority* of the workers were at least organizationally united. And in nearly all cases where the defeated union maintained its own separate organization and tried to keep the workers out of the union that had won the election, the workers bypassed it, leaving it isolated.

The main exception to this rule has been that of groups of skilled tool-room workers, who have mistakenly felt that, by separate craft organization and because of the shortage of skilled workers, they could improve their bargaining position over that

of the unskilled and semi-skilled production workers. Also as a general rule, after a union was once raided, the workers stood by their original vote, refusing to heed the new siren call, even when coming from the union which originally had been the victim of the raid.

The starting point, therefore, of any approach to unity of, and unity with, the workers in the Right-wing led unions, is to accept, and not merely accept, but to agree with, their class approach towards their own union. We must be sure that opposition or disagreement with leadership policies and practices can never be made to appear in the eyes of the workers as opposition to their union, or an attempt to belittle its achievements. For the pride which a worker feels in his union and its accomplishments is an important asset, not a liability. And there is none in the United States who can more rightfully share this pride than the Communists. For the Communists were among the pioneers who helped bring unionism to the workers in the trustified industries. It was William Z. Foster, the foremost leader of our Party, who more than any single individual contributed to the organization of the unorganized and to the strategy and tactics of militant trade unionism.

It is precisely because the labor fakers, the Murrays, Reuthers, Dubinskys, Hutchesons, Rieves, and the others, know full well the feeling of the workers to their unions, that they

consciously try to distort every *inner*-union disagreement with their class-collaboration policies and dictatorial practices, into the appearance of an *anti*-union opposition. Note that after John L. Lewis appeared as a guest speaker before the Ford Local's giant 10th Anniversary Celebration last June, Walter Reuther sought to evade the embarrassing but pertinent questions put to him by insinuating that the presence of Lewis at the celebration meant that certain Ford local leaders were contemplating taking the local out of the U.A.W. This of course is preposterous. The demagogue Reuther knows full well, however, that he dare not discuss the proposals of the progressives on their merits. That is why he must seek to make these proposals appear as anti-union attacks instead of the pro-union defenses that they really are.*

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It is the failure to see the Right-led unions as class organizations, the tendency to confuse the leaders with the rank-and-file, which explains the failure or slowness to fight *concretely* for labor unity wherever the class struggle expresses itself. And it expresses itself everyday in every shop and in every union. For just as it is true that people speak in prose long before they know what prose is, so workers, whether in Right-wing or

progressive-led unions, participate in the class struggle long before they are *conscious* of its existence.

If the principle of labor unity is to have any meaning at all, therefore, it must find its expression and grow out of an even more elementary trade-union *solidarity*. When workers are on strike, when they are fighting their boss on the picket line, when their kitchen pantries are empty, that is when they need help and should get it, *irrespective* of their leadership or the political position they may have taken on one or another occasion. And the Communists in the labor movement must be the first to teach the workers this simple truth. It is they who must plant the many tiny acorns of solidarity from which alone can and will arise the mighty forest of working-class unity. The adage, that a friend in need is a friend in deed, is still a good one to remember.

In 1951, thousands of important strike struggles were fought out. Most of these were of workers in Right-led unions. How did the progressive workers express their solidarity? How did they work to express the solidarity and unity of the workers, plant to plant, union to union, industry to industry? There were, of course, numerous examples of class solidarity displayed. But these were still the exception. Attention, however, should be called to two splendid examples of such solidarity and unity of action.

The first was the magnificent unity

* This article was written before Reuther's dictatorial seizure of Local 600. But even after this most blatant violation of elementary trade-union democracy, Reuther denies that his action was directed against an inter-union opposition. Instead, he tries to pass it off as an emergency action to "save" the union from "anti-union" forces.—J. S.

of action which was welded during the strike in the copper mining industry—from Left to Right, including independent union and A. F. of L. And while the independent Mine-Mill Union played the leading role, the victory won belongs to all of them.

The second was displayed by the independent Longshore Union headed by Harry Bridges. This act of solidarity took place under the following circumstances. In July, the contract between the M.E.B.A. (Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association, C.I.O.), and the Isthmian Line, expired. The company refused to renew the contract and forced a strike. To break this strike it proceeded to sign up 37 ships with the Brotherhood of Marine Engineers affiliated with the A. F. of L. Seafarers Union. The Longshore Union refused to cross the C.I.O. picket lines, and Harry Bridges was quoted as saying: "I've got no love for the C.I.O., but there's a trade union principle at stake here."

The net effect of this simple act of solidarity can be seen by the editorial which appeared in the M.E.B.A. paper. It read: "In these days, when wolves, jackals and hyenas abound in the labor movement and a legitimate strike is a signal for the phonies to strikebreak and scab, an act of honest trade-unionism is something to be appreciated and lauded. . . . The entire I.L.W.U. from president Harry Bridges . . . down to every rank-and-file member has dem-

onstrated its loyalty to trade union principles."

Well said, indeed! It is a sad commentary on the moral climate in the American labor movement that acts such as this are the exception and not the rule.

Yes, every *concrete* ounce of labor solidarity is worth a hundred pounds of *general talk* about it. The "wolves" and "jackals" which "abound in the labor movement" have sullied the air with their foul animal stench of "mine for me and to hell with the next fellow." This is true to such an extent that now and then even honest progressive trade-union leaders and workers begin to think of answering the wolves by acting like wolves themselves. They begin to think only in the narrow terms of "my union versus your union," and forget the elementary truism that working-class principles stand above both individuals and individual unions, and that either the workers will learn how to fight together in order to win together, or they will all surely lose separately.

Labor solidarity and unity must be fought for daily, not just on special occasions. And never—NEVER—must it be merely an empty gesture, something just for the record. It must at all times be the very heart and soul of Communist and progressive trade-union work.

When it becomes this, hundreds and even thousands of opportunities will be found for applying it in practice. For the problem of solidarity

and unity begins in every department of every shop, mine and mill. The problem of the unity of the Negro and white workers, of the skilled and unskilled, of the men and women workers, of the older and newer workers, of the employed with the unemployed, are all distinct facets of the problem of solidarity and unity which arise right on the job.

Of greatest importance is the struggle for Negro and white unity. The key to the problem here is the white worker who must learn that *his* stake in this unity is just as great as that of the Negro worker. He must learn that this unity cannot be firmly established and cemented unless the white worker fights for *full* equality for the Negro worker, first on the job, but also off the job. And the special task of white Communists is not that of *telling* Negro workers how much they stand for equality, but of *proving* this by fighting for it *in the ranks of the white workers*.

In the many industrial plants where the skilled crafts belong to separate unions, this undoubtedly represents a negative factor in terms of plant-wide workers' unity. But it can be transformed into a most important positive factor having repercussions beyond the single plant itself. This is possible where the progressive workers consciously work to *subordinate* the differences arising from different union membership, and to *elevate* that which these workers have in common, namely, their common status as wage workers in one plant.

Different union affiliations need not and should not be an obstacle to joint action in behalf of joint grievances, in contract negotiations, in wage disputes, and in generally presenting a common front before the boss.

Even where at first every overture is met by rebuff, the progressive worker and the progressive union must never cease to work for united action. In those cases where the workers of the other union get embroiled in a struggle, even after they have turned down joint action, it is the duty of progressive workers to come to their assistance in every possible way and never to sit back, shrug off the problem and say "good for them."

It must be understood that, when you boil it down to its hard core, the difference between honest progressive trade unionism and class-collaboration unionism is the difference between really defending the interests of the workers and merely pretending to do so. And this difference will at first become apparent to most workers, not on so-called big national and international questions, but on the most immediate and closest questions to them, the questions of bread and butter. Nor can this difference be discerned merely in words. It will have to show itself in deeds; the simple deeds that every worker can test on the basis of his own experience.

Where workers are employed by giant corporations owning scores of huge mines, mills and plants, and

where, as is so frequently true, the workers belong to widely separated unions, it is of great importance to begin the fight for joint negotiations and joint united action at contract time. The present situation where every union tries to outsmart the other, generally leads to a situation in which they all get outsmarted by the corporation. For even in instances where the workers of a given plant have full confidence in both the will and ability of their own leaders to negotiate a "good" contract, it logically follows that the greater the degree of unity of all the employees of this company, the stronger they are and the better their chances of victory.

Here, too, if proposals for united action are defeated on union floors or

turned down by the other union, this cannot be used as a pretext for giving up the struggle for unity. It only means that more work must be done in the ranks of the workers, and they must at all times know exactly what the score is. Above all, let us repeat, the struggle for unity cannot be considered as a gesture or a maneuver to put someone else on the spot. For the workers are generally fed up with the maneuvers of one union against another. Often, therefore, even sincere proposals are rejected because the workers suspect a concealed booby-trap. How they feel about insincerity is best seen in the fact that there is no epithet in the workers' rich arsenal of salty language which has so much derision and sting to it as when they call someone "a phony."