

Some Problems of Work in Right-Led Unions, II

By John Swift

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The present situation in the labor movement makes it quite obvious that the movement for unity of action must first take form in the ranks of the workers themselves through a *united front from below*. This is true because only by moving the rank-and-file, only by getting them to grip the hands of their fellow workers in solidarity, can they consciously press for unity of action all along the line, local with local, union with union, culminating in organic unity itself.

But while stressing this as central and decisive, in fact, in order to best facilitate its success, we also must warn against a one-sided, mechanical over-simplification of this tactic of the united front from below. Such over-simplification arises from seeing the contradiction between the rank-and-file and the labor bureaucrats, but failing to see that these opposites also form a unity, without which the Right-wing led unions could not continue to exist. In other words, what we are saying is that

there is no hard and fast line that divides the leadership from the ranks.

In the first place, the leaders in order to remain leaders, dare not forget the class nature of the union they head and constantly must appear to be the champions of the workers' interests. This means that they endeavor to conceal their betrayal policies, indulge in militant speech-making, now and then denounce the "heartless avaricious profiteers," and periodically "lead" strike struggles. And these demagogic talents are needed by the bourgeoisie, even if at times it may think that its "boys" are going "too far," for how otherwise could these fakers continue to stay at the head of working class unions?

The other side of this coin is that the workers in large numbers also get sucked in by this deception. Nor should we idealize the workers. As long as their outlook is not influenced by the party of socialism, the Communist Party, so long is it inevitable that this outlook should tend to become petty, with narrow craft interests overshadowing general class interests. We must not forget that

this is inherent in the very fact that a trade union, although a product of the class struggle, has but a limited objective, namely, to improve the lot of the workers *under* capitalism, not to abolish capitalism. Thus, so long as objective conditions enable the reformist leaders to "get" some concessions, the workers, too, are affected by class-collaboration ideas, giving credit for victories to the "bargaining" of their negotiators instead of to their own organized strength.

This actual state of affairs must be taken into account in the struggle for unity. It means that, while the rank-and-file workers are impelled toward unity of action by their very class conditions, even despite their leaders, they are not yet ready to think of unity as against their leaders. This means that any approach to unity which smacks of being motivated by anti-leadership considerations and which indulges in wholesale condemnations of leadership, becomes suspect immediately in the minds of the workers as unprincipled "power politics."

Therefore the movement of the rank-and-file for progressive policies must start out as a *positive* movement *for* something, for a *single* demand stemming from the immediate needs of the rank-and-file or for a *program* of demands. The fight must develop, not over individuals in the leadership, but around the demands and program of the workers. Of course, individuals may symbolize one side or the other in this

struggle, but always uppermost must be the program. Any failure to pursue such a policy can only prevent unity on the broadest basis and can only give to the labor fakers a weapon with which to combat the rank-and-file movement.

It is for this reason that we believe that a recent heading over a story in an outstanding progressive labor magazine was unfortunate because it was inaccurate. This heading read: "Anti-Reuther Forces Unite To Fight Lay-Offs, Speed-Up." In our opinion this heading puts the emphasis in the wrong place. The rank-and-file movement in auto cuts across the pro- and anti-Reuther lines. And it must do so to register its maximum effectiveness. If this movement comes into collision with Reuther, as it has and must, this is because Reuther stands in opposition to this program, and not the other way around. The rank-and-file movement must not permit the leadership to shift the issue to "for, or against, Reuther." Unless this is kept in mind, the rank-and-file movement can be wrecked. If it is kept in mind, the exposure of Reuther which is so necessary will be concrete and convincing and not mere name-calling.

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Another error customarily made is to assume that because a given union leadership is generally reactionary, that *all* of its proposals and actions are likewise reactionary. Were this the case, things would indeed

be simple. For then these fakers would be doing a good job of exposing themselves. But they are not that kind.

Things are much more complicated. Even reactionary labor leaders are forced to take progressive stands on one or another issue and for one or another reason. In the first place they must consider the rank-and-file. Then, periodically some of them become frightened that the fascist bell may toll for them, too. In still other instances, their position may reflect the *special* interests of that section of the bourgeoisie with which they have the closest contact. And lastly, their actions may be impelled by inner and inter-union careerist politics.

All these must be taken into account in determining tactics. But in so doing it must be remembered always that one progressive position does not make a progressive leader, any more than one or a dozen apples make an apple orchard. If this is remembered it will lessen the tendency to re-evaluate labor leaders every time they make a statement.

Our basic evaluation must rest on a solid foundation. This today is determined by the central issue, the issue of war or peace. A labor leader is a progressive to the degree that he stands for peace, not abstractly, but concretely—that is, for peace and co-existence with the Soviet Union. He is a reactionary to the extent that he stands for war—that is, supports the war drive of U.S. imperialism

and its anti-Soviet foreign policy.

No matter how militant a trade-union leader may sound on other questions, to the extent that he supports the war drive, he is a reactionary. This may not be evident at first sight but, in the last analysis, the position one occupies on this central question will determine his position on most other questions. It will determine how far he goes in fighting the wage freeze, what attitude he takes toward strikes, with what determination he fights for Negro rights, how seriously he approaches the emasculation of the Bill of Rights, what approach he takes to such things as speed-up, taxes, the high cost of living, corruption in government, red-baiting, etc.

It makes no difference how militantly he sounds off against the phony wage-stabilization and price-control programs (and there is not a labor leader who does not do so), this is all plain hogwash to the extent that he supports the so-called "defense program." For the thorns which labor reaps are of this tree. And when it comes to a showdown one must either take his stand for high war expenditures and a lower standard of living, or the other way around. This is one fence that cannot be straddled, and those who are trying to do so ought to be knocked off by the lance of the workers' ire.

All this is by no means obvious to the millions. Therefore when the reformist leader of a given union speaks up for smashing the wage

freeze, it would indeed be foolish to take the floor and call him a hypocrite. Instead, one should heartily agree with this need and then proceed to indicate what can and should be *done* to bring it about. In other words, progressive statements or proposals must not be left hanging in air. They must be pinned down to concrete, specific *actions*. The important thing is not to permit the workers to be lulled into a false sense of security by fancy words and promises, but to put them into motion. For only when masses are in motion, only when they are *consciously* heading somewhere, even if only short range, can they ascertain who stands in their way or tries to drag them back.

This means that progressive trade unionists must not hesitate to support proposals in the interests of the workers simply because others have initiated them. For example, a few months ago, A. J. Hayes, President of the International Association of Machinists, A. F. of L., correctly observed that forty-four million Americans now pay federal income taxes and that few indeed are the workers that escape them. Hayes went on to observe further that the B.L.S. cost-of-living index, which is the yardstick used by the government to determine the level of wages, is a "snare and a delusion" because it fails to take income taxes into account. He proposed a fight on the part of labor to force an inclusion of taxes in the cost-of-living

index and a corresponding increase in wages for the workers. This would range from ten to twenty percent on an average.

This proposal was immediately attacked by the *Washington Post* and by other big business periodicals who quoted President Truman's "Economic Report" to the effect that the government would consider it unpatriotic "for any group to seek to adjust its income upward, to counteract the higher taxes which the defense program is making necessary," for this, said Truman, "would tend to relieve that group from its share in the cost of achieving national security." To which Hayes replied that business always has relieved itself of its tax burden by passing it along in higher prices to the consumers and that therefore his proposal to shift the workers' tax load to the employers would not be any less patriotic, for after all, what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

Now it is quite evident that Brother Hayes' proposal is not the most important plank in a progressive wage program, for it does not challenge the phony "national emergency" which is the *root* cause for the high taxes and high prices. Nor does it challenge the very *right* of the government to use this hot-house "emergency" to freeze wages *at any level*.

But it is likewise true that millions of workers who are not yet convinced that the emergency is phony are nonetheless incensed at the ex-

orbitant taxes that are gnawing at their family incomes and at the cynical refusal of the B.L.S. to consider this in its cost-of-living tabulations. Therefore the struggle for this *partial* wage demand is important. A militant, consistent fight for it would bring labor into collision with the war program and the Truman Administration as well as with the war profiteering monopolies.

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Just as progressive workers should support every partial demand which improves the lot of the workers, so should they take pride in whatever partial victories are won. It is a mistake to believe that such victories cannot and are not being won even in reactionary-led unions. Of course, every such victory has two sides to it: the positive side, that is, the improvement in the conditions of the workers; and the negative side, that is, the illusions that are cultivated in the minds of the workers that it may be possible to solve all their problems through such partial improvements and under Right-wing leadership.

Under no circumstances, however, can progressives counter-act this latter negative aspect by adopting a negative attitude either toward the struggle for partial demands or toward the victories won. Nor should they minimize the importance of these victories in the eyes of the workers, for contained within them

are the seeds of much greater victories. But such greater victories can come only if the workers learn the main lesson: the need for militant *struggle*, and for *united* struggle.

Unless such an approach is taken, the progressives will only facilitate the attempt of the Right-wing leaders to hog for themselves the full credit for the victory, ignoring the *decisive* role of the rank-and-file. Furthermore, such an error would only enable the reactionaries in the union demagogically to charge the Communists and progressives with being "agin' everything" just because they are not in leadership. Frequently this charge is made in unions in which the Left-wing did at one time hold leading positions. And yet, whatever gains the Currans and Quills win even today, are more due to their fear and the fear of the bosses of the influence of the Left-wing among the rank-and-file, than to their own militancy. For like Banquo's ghost, it still haunts them, but unlike this ghost, it is far more than an apparition.

The same careful approach is necessary when the progressives take the initiative in proposing partial demands and actions themselves. Just as a farmer does not raise *crops in general*, but very *particular crops*, related to his particular soil, climate, implements, experience and market demand, so workers do not support *demands in general*, but *particular demands*, best suited to their particular concrete needs. To switch meta-

phors, we must always be sure that the shoe fits the particular foot and not some other foot.

This means knowing one's industry and trade, knowing the concrete economic trends, the human material that make up the workers in the industry, their background, level of understanding and experience, etc. Of course, opportunists do frequently try to conceal their opportunism with pleas about "exceptional circumstances." But while rejecting such excuses and all excuses for opportunism, this does not deny the need for specific concreteness instead of general abstractness. In fact, only a concrete examination of every situation can effectively expose and rout opportunism. For great indeed are the specific opportunistic crimes concealed in the elephantine body of generalities! And concreteness is more necessary today than ever, because of the uneven development of the workers' experience and understanding, and because of the special and peculiar economic situation in which conditions of boom and depression live side by side.

We know, for example, that the workers are restive about the high cost-of-living and have shown a readiness to battle militantly for substantial wage increases and against the wage freeze. This is certainly true in general. In particular, however, it is more true in the war producing industries, where maximum production, full employment and exorbitant profits are all factors that

create the most favorable conditions for a mass break-through on the wage front.

This explains the mood of the steel workers. And while at the time this article is being written it is not yet certain as to what will happen in the steel wage dispute, one thing is certain: the workers in this industry have the strength, if they use their strike weapon, to smash the wage freeze and to compel the steel barons to give them a very substantial wage increase, even more than what they have asked for. But the only thing that prevents such an outstanding victory and will most likely result in a much smaller settlement which ties a wage increase to "productivity," that is, to increased speed-up, is Murray's class collaboration outlook in general and his support to the war program of monopoly capital in particular.

This mood for militant wage struggles also can be seen in what is shaping up in the oil industry. Here, on November 24-25, an unprecedented event occurred. Eighteen separate unions, including the C.I.O., A. F. of L., and a number of independent unions, gathered in national conference and worked out a "joint strategy to be pursued in current wage disputes," and "pledged that no union would settle for less than a 25 cents an hour general wage increase." Whether this agreement is strictly adhered to or not remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is that only the militant fighting

mood of the workers has made this united front possible.

At the same time, it would be mechanical, for example, to expect the workers in the textile and hosiery industries to react to the wage fight in the exact same way. For these industries are suffering from over-production, and the workers face mass unemployment and widespread part-time work. This of course, does not in any way exonerate the Rieves for their failure to demand a wage increase from the mill owners when the wage-reopener came up. For by bowing before the woolen and cotton magnates, they have since received the kicks asked for—in the form of arrogant ultimatums demanding wholesale wage-cuts and increased work-loads, or an abrogation of contracts.

But while having nothing but contempt for the miserable Rieve and his other Social-Democrats in leadership, one would be light-minded, indeed, not to see the concrete difference between the depression conditions in textile and the boom conditions in the war producing industries. If Rieve were a real fighter for the workers and not a lickspittle of the bosses, he would, of course, organize the workers for a militant fight against the war economy which is lowering living standards and thereby accentuating over-production and crisis in the consumer goods industries.

In industries such as textile, the fight against unemployment, for a

shorter work week *without reduction in weekly wage*, for \$60 a week unemployment insurance benefits, must be coupled with the fight against the high cost-of-living, for wage increases, for organizing the unorganized and for the preservation of the union.

Not even in a single industry like auto will the same demands receive the same response. In Detroit where unemployment has reached proportions which have brought soup kitchens into existence for the first time since the '30's, unemployment is, of course, a paramount issue. In other parts of the industry, where war contracts abound, however, there is a tight labor market and unemployment does not appear as the principal issue. Even in Detroit, in a plant such as Ford, the conditions of the highly skilled tool and die workers are quite different from those of the foundry workers, and therefore their demands will likewise vary.

Hence concreteness is essential to correct leadership. And this is true not only on economic issues, but on the questions of the struggle for Negro rights, for political action, or for peace.

Let us take the latter. It may not be possible to get a Right-wing led local union to take a stand in favor of a Big Five Peace Pact. But it may be possible to get the local to express itself in favor of a top level meeting of the big powers which the Gallup Poll shows 70 percent of the

American people want. Such an initial step forward on peace would be very important. It would begin to *change the atmosphere* inside the labor movement, making discussion and action on peace a patriotic necessity for a labor union.

Difficulties in the way of getting affirmative action on one or another peace proposal or issue cannot be used to excuse the failure to fight for peace. *Difficulties and obstacles are there to be overcome.* If one method or one proposal does not work, we are *duty bound* to try others and to *keep on trying*, until a positive beginning is made from which to move to further progress. And the same tenacious approach must be taken to winning jobs and upgrading for Negro workers and to finding the forms of political action that will begin to break labor away from the two-party system of monopoly capital.

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We have stressed the fact that there is no insurmountable wall that separates the leaders from the ranks and the ranks from the leaders. After all, where do the ranks end and the leaders begin? For there are leaders and *leaders*—a top, a middle and a lower stratum of leaders. While all these have something in common, that is, they are part of one bureaucracy, they also have their differences. Those who are closest to the ranks and most recently from the ranks feel more the breath of the

class struggle and pressures from the rank-and-file. They therefore form something of a transitional bridge from the ranks to the top leadership.

Hence, just as it is a mistake to see a Right-wing led union one-sidedly, so also is it a mistake to see the leadership one-sidedly. As the ranks struggle and exert pressure, so fissures, rifts and even chasms are created in the leadership. A close study of the leadership of nearly any Right-wing led local union, no matter how united and solid it may appear from a distance, will show that it is nevertheless torn by its own inner dissensions and differences. Even if from a subjective point of view, these rifts often appear as unprincipled personality clashes and factional struggles, objectively, however, they constitute a distorted reflection of the basic antagonism in the union—that between its class character and the needs of its membership and the class collaboration policies and bureaucratic caste interests of the top leadership.

Thus a *concrete* study of these differences is important, and individuals should not be lumped together for anything but purposes of general classification. It should be understood that many honest, progressive fighters and future Communists will come from the ranks of present-day local leaders of Right-wing led unions. For in many of these unions there are plenty of local leaders who “go along” with official policies be-

cause they see no practical effective alternative program. But they do not like it.

The same kind of a concrete approach must be taken toward different unions. It is a mistake to treat all unions and all union leaderships alike because they all voted for the same reactionary resolutions at an A. F. of L. or C.I.O. convention. Between such unions there may be great differences which are determined by many factors such as the nature of the industry, the composition of its workers, the percentage of skilled workers, the role of the Negro workers, the history and tradition of the workers, the structure of the union and its leadership, the composition of the leadership and particularly the role and influence of our Party.

There are, then, reactionary-led unions of varied levels and degrees. The leaders of one union are heading up the war parade, drumming up war hysteria, tooting their anti-Communist horns, and shrilly vying with the monopolists for the "honor" of being the most anti-Communist and anti-Soviet. There is, for example, the despicable act of William Green who outdid McCarthy by asking for no less than the expulsion of the Soviet Union from the United Nations!

But then there are the less vociferous paraders, the "shamefaced" go-alongers, the men with much "doubts" but little guts, who would like to be out of the parade but at the same time "in step" with the powers that be.

These differences frequently find their expression in the policies of different unions, on such questions as the degree of support for the war drive, whether to conduct a witch-hunt in their own union, how much rank-and-file expression is to be permitted, how militantly to fight economic grievances, etc. These, too, must be taken into account.

It must be recognized that just as there are no hard and fast dividing lines in nature and just as there are intermediary forms in both nature and society, so are there bound to be such gradations and shadings in the trade union movement. And these are of immense importance. The key thing for every Communist and progressive trade unionist to remember is to evaluate concretely every given situation *in all its process of motion*, with an eye precisely to grasping these elements in the situation which can *help* the process of change in a *progressive* and forward-moving direction.

To see unions statically is fatal, for nothing in life stands still, neither a Right-wing led union nor a Left-wing led union. If in a Right-wing led trade union there develops a "live and let live" attitude, one which enables greater freedom of action on the part of the rank-and-file, one which enables Left-wing and Communist workers to contribute their part to the union and its echelons of leadership, then this is a step forward, a break from the extreme Right-wing position and, therefore,

a welcome move to be encouraged. If, however, a progressive led local, such as the Warehouse Local No. 65 in New York City, comes forth with a "live and let live" creed toward the bosses and the warmongers, then this represents a dangerous step backwards, and more than a step.

Obviously also, in unions where the Right-wing has dictatorial power, where the victory of outright Left and Communist forces in local elections only results in head chopping and charter lifting, the process of change at the bottom will be more quantitative at first. It will first find its expression in a greater unity on a department and shop level. It will express itself in less rabid control and in an inclusion of more honest elements in the local leadership. It will express itself in greater democracy and militancy and in a greater awareness of the needs of the Negro workers and their fuller inclusion into leadership. It will express itself in the formation of a coalition, at first loosely formed, including progressive and Left-wing workers. etc.

The main problem is precisely that of finding the forms to this transition, the *concrete* ways and means by which to begin to change the situation in local by local and union by union.

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To achieve unity of action on the part of the American labor movement, does not require a leap from complete Right-wing to complete

Left-wing leadership. It must be achieved before then. Its requisite is not ideological unity. What it requires first and foremost is a readiness to put ideological differences aside in order to work together in behalf of a *single immediate objective* or a *number of immediate objectives*. Not even labor unity, in the sense of a single trade-union center, requires ideological unity. What it requires is the agreement that there is room *within one labor movement* for different ideological currents and for the conflict of views between them. It further requires that no individuals or unions should be excluded from the labor movement because of ideological differences and that the workers be given the *freedom to choose* between conflicting tendencies. And it requires above all, the recognition that *despite* ideological differences, the unions must work together and fight together around a minimum common program agreed upon.

The initiative shown by the I.L.W.U. and the Mine, Mill and Smelter Union, in the examples pointed out in the first installment of this article, indicate the decisive role which can be played by existing Left-led unions in the struggle for unity of action of all workers around a common program.

The struggle for unity of action on the part of workers in Right-led unions would be immeasurably strengthened if Communist and Left-progressive forces in the Left-led un-

ions would see their role as the most consistent fighter for unity in the entire trade-union movement.

If these Left-led unions would establish more effective co-ordination among themselves and project common programs of action reflecting the needs of all workers, and combine this with a day-to-day struggle for united action with workers in the C.I.O. and A. F. of L. on all levels, a new stage would be reached in the cause of labor unity.

Toward such labor unity every Communist must work with skill, determination and confidence. One thing is certain. The *changing* objective conditions will more and more favor the struggle for unity of action and labor unity. The monopolistic position of American imperialism in the post-war capitalist world has made it possible for it to continue to bribe a considerable section of workers with its immense super-profits. Thus the material basis for opportunism has continued in this country longer than anywhere else.

If the workers have thus far gone along with the armament drive and war program, even if passively, it was because of the illusion that material benefits in the form of full employment and a higher standard of living would be derived from it. Now, however, it is *beginning* to dawn on a larger mass of workers that this very war program is producing the opposite results—is the cause for high prices and high taxes, for speed-up, for growing unemployment and for lower living standards. Even the labor reformists cannot entirely hide this truth. Thus the material conditions of life will henceforth and at an increasing pace, help teach the workers the need for class solidarity and unity at home and for world labor unity.

But objective conditions, while primary, are not enough. What is needed is *conscious* and *skillful* struggle and guidance toward this end. This must start in the first place with every Communist worker, in his shop and in his local union.