

The Left and the Struggle for Labor Unity, I

By John Swift

THE NEW SPIRIT OF MILITANCY is becoming manifest in the ranks of organized labor. This is expressing itself in numerous ways and particularly in a growing movement for united labor action and organic labor unity. To influence this trend and to help it achieve final fruition is a task of great magnitude and importance.

In order to play an even more *conscious* and *leading* role in this struggle, it is necessary that all Communist and Left-wing trade unionists clearly understand the fundamental prerequisites needed for attaining such unity. Any lack of clarity or fuzziness in our understanding of this key problem can reflect itself only in practical policies which will harm the cause of real labor unity.

In the recent period there has been a great deal of stress placed on the *decisive* importance of working with and winning the present Right-led trade unions for progressive policies and working class unity. And properly so. These unions represent the overwhelming majority of the organized workers and those in the most basic mass production industries.

From this correct emphasis some comrades have drawn an incorrect conclusion. They have drawn the inference that the present indepen-

dent progressive unions, in which the Left has considerable influence and shares in leadership, have no important role to play. Such a conclusion is totally unwarranted and exceedingly harmful.

It is one thing to see realistically the relationship of forces in the labor movement and where the *major* attention must be given if a change is to be brought about. It is quite another matter to transform this main emphasis into an only emphasis. Such over-emphasis could lead in the long run to a weakening of the struggle for labor unity. For the independent progressive unions have a very important and *special* role to play in this struggle, one which they alone can fulfill.

This article is addressed to the problem of the role of the progressive and Left-led unions in the struggle for labor unity. We shall treat the subject in two parts. The first part will deal with some general aspects of this question. Without understanding the *general* role and significance of the Left current in the labor movement, it is impossible to understand the *special* importance of the progressive Left-led unions. The second part of this article will discuss some of the immediate practical problems confronting these unions in their struggle for

labor unity.

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The great importance of the Left current in the labor movement becomes abundantly clear when we stop to think more deeply about what we mean by the words "labor unity." After all, both Walter Reuther and George Meany also use this phrase. The Communist concept of it, however, is not exactly the same as theirs. When Reuther and Meany refer to labor unity, they are thinking almost exclusively of the split between the A. F. of L. and the C.I.O. The Communist approach to labor unity, of course, also includes the healing of the rift between the A. F. of L. and the C.I.O., a split which arose originally over the issue of craft versus industrial unions. It embraces much more than that. It includes much more than even the unity between the C.I.O., A. F. of L., Railroad Brotherhoods and United Mine Workers.

This is so because the split in the ranks of the workers which had its origin in narrow-minded, petty craft-ideology, and which continues to exist because of the personal ambitions and careerism of the top labor bureaucrats, A. F. of L. and C.I.O., is not the only split tearing the heart out of organized labor. There is another, and from an historic and basic class point of view, an even more damaging split, one which keeps the labor movement in a state of relative impotency.

This is the split between the two ideological wings of the labor move-

ment. The first of these bases itself on the recognition of the class struggle as a material, objective fact which cannot be conjured away. The second of these trends denies the reality or irreconcilability of the class struggle and practices and preaches class collaboration.

The first is the militant Left-wing current. This includes the Communists but is not limited to them. Those workers who accept the existence of a class struggle and base themselves, consciously or instinctively, on class struggle policies, are much greater in number than those who adhere to the principles of Communism.

The second is the Right-wing reformist current. This includes not only the more conscious Social-Democratic elements such as Reuther and Dubinsky, but also the more rash and brash adherents of capitalism, such as Meany, David McDonald of the Steelworkers union and John L. Lewis. All together, these make up the American variant of the international camp of Right-wing social-democracy.* These are grouped together here only for purposes of general classification, and not because there are no differences between them. From a political and

* Some readers may question the use of this formulation because the American labor bureaucrats, *unlike* some of their European counterparts, do not indulge in "socialist" phrases. But the new feature of international social-democracy lies precisely in the fact that the domination of the American dollar in the capitalist world has reflected itself in the domination of the ideology of the American form of labor opportunism on the labor reformists of Western Europe. Thus, there is less and less talk of socialism and more talk of "Third Force" Capitalism.

tactical point of view, these differences frequently are very important.

These two ideological and political trends exist in the labor movement of every capitalist country. Nor can they be conciliated. They must be fought out. But the *concrete* problem of labor unity lies precisely in the objective existence of these two wings and the urgent need to bring them together into a united front based upon a common acceptable economic and political program of united action. So long as these two trends exist, labor unity cannot be achieved by one trend to the exclusion of the other. It can be accomplished only by a *conscious* policy which includes both trends, and which enables the workers to judge freely for themselves between them while remaining united in one and the same labor movement.

Any other approach than this is a denial, in practice, of the need for, or the possibility of attaining, a united labor movement in the immediate period ahead.

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When we think of labor unity in this deeper sense, we can realize that even the achievement of unity between the A. F. of L. and C.I.O., as important as such a development would be, would not yet constitute labor unity in its fullest class sense.

It is from this point of view that one can understand the great significance of the progressive independent unions in which the Left has influence and shares in leadership. This significance lies not alone in their

numerical strength, although this is by no means unimportant. It is to be found in the cardinal fact that these unions alone in the labor movement publicly proclaim and defend the only real path to labor unity. In their very make-up they embody the principle of labor unity cutting across ideological lines. For it is a mistake to believe that these unions are made up predominantly of Left-minded workers. Where this error in judgment is committed great damage can be done.

The difference between these progressive independent unions and the main mass of the labor movement is that the workers in the former unions by their own experiences have learned the wisdom of unity with the Left. They judge leadership on the basis of policy and performance. Frequently, in these unions, workers who otherwise consider themselves as conservatives will vote their preference consciously for Left-wing leaders in whom they have confidence. These they are ready to entrust with leadership in the defense of their economic interests and their democratic trade-union rights.

As a logical corollary of such action, these unions refuse to go along with Red-baiting which they recognize as the insidious splitting weapon of the bosses. They reject the anti-Communist hysteria and the war drive. They stubbornly resist the enticing and corrupting lure of a phony prosperity based on war and war production. It is these un-

ions which hold aloft the banner of working class and Negro-white unity, of true independent political action, of peace, and of international labor solidarity. It is they, therefore, who represent the very best traditions, the basic interests, the honor and integrity of the American labor movement.

No wonder these unions and their leaders have won the undying enmity of the reactionaries and war mongers of every stripe and, by the same token, the militant adherence and affection of their rank and file and the admiration and respect of all class conscious and progressive-minded workers.

Hence the existence of these unions represents an important plus, and not a minus, in the struggle for *real* labor unity. Their weakening or destruction would constitute a blow at labor unity. There cannot be real labor unity which does not base itself on the principle of unity *despite* ideological differences and *inclusive* of these differences.

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At this point it is important to note, that while the unity of the working class is a principle for which Communists fight, we cannot and do not approach this problem in a formal or abstract fashion. There are times when the very *form* of unity may conceal the *substance* of disunity. This was certainly true in the '20's and early '30's. The formal unity of some 2½ million A. F. of L. craft workers was used to screen from sight the more basic split

which existed between the small minority of organized, better paid, skilled workers, and the great majority of unorganized, low paid, unskilled and semi-skilled workers. Many of these latter were Negroes, foreign-born, women and youth.

In that concrete situation the Communists favored the organization of the unorganized, although it meant expulsion from the A. F. of L. of the unions comprising the Committee for Industrial Organization. The rupture in the unity of the A. F. of L. was a lesser evil to the far greater one of an unorganized and thereby disorganized working class. Our attitude towards formal organic unity had to be determined by the best interests of the working class as a whole. To have worshipped the *formal letter* of A. F. of L. unity would have meant the betrayal of the *living spirit* of working-class unity.

The Communists strongly favor the reunification of the A. F. of L. and C.I.O. today because it is a foregone conclusion that such unity can be obtained only by an acceptance of the industrial as well as the craft forms of union organization. The great need for such unity is dictated by current events, by the mounting threat to labor's standard of living, collectively and to its very existence.

The achievement of A. F. of L. C.I.O. unity would constitute an important step forward. From it the workers would get a new feeling of unity and strength. They would begin to think more in terms of united class action and not merely along

narrow craft-industry, or "my own union" lines. The main obstacle to such unity today is the fact that the A. F. of L. and C.I.O. officialdom have a vested interest in a divided labor movement. A. F. of L.-C.I.O. unity cannot come, therefore, without a vigorous struggle of the rank and file for joint action, *first of all*, to be followed later by organic unity. Such pressure has been mounting in recent months, particularly since the November elections.

Granted that A. F. of L. - C.I.O. unity is achieved, the task of forging real working-class unity, which means a unity bridging the ideological gap between Right and Left, is still the key. It is this which will decide whether labor plays its role of blocking the path to fascism and war in the period ahead or whether it takes the shameful path of the Social-Democratic controlled German labor movement of the pre-Hitler period.

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To fully grasp the crucial importance of Right-Left unity, let us remember that the period of greatest headway of the labor movement was one in which a split occurred in the ranks of the reformist labor leaders and their unions, with the pro-industrial union group uniting with the Left. It was in this period that labor more than quadrupled its size and organized the most important basic industries. It is this unity with the Left which made possible the great leap forward in trade-union organization from a minority movement to

the majority movement of the industrial workers of the country.

This unity did not remove ideological nor all political differences, for there is no hard and fast dividing line between ideology and politics. Lewis, Murray and Sidney Hillman did not renounce their class collaboration views and practices although we sometimes tended to forget this. Conversely, the Left did not surrender its own advanced ideology and class struggle policies. What, therefore, brought these two currents together?

First, the ravages of the economic crisis had let loose an angry torrent of class struggle. The organized workers in the mass production industries realized that only the organization of the unorganized could bring about an improvement in their own bargaining position. Even sections of skilled workers recognized this, for with the end of "prosperity" their own preferred positions had greatly deteriorated. Furthermore, the old gray-bearded A. F. of L. saw, which held "you can't organize the unskilled," was exposed as so much nonsense by the movement for unionism of the unorganized themselves. The pressure for a militant policy of organizing the unorganized, therefore, was great in a number of key unions such as miners, needle, garment trades, etc.

Second, the workers had learned some important lessons from the intense Red-baiting spree of the '20's. Everything progressive, including the demands for unemployment in-

insurance and industrial unions, had been branded "Red." The workers also realized that the organization of the mass production industries would be no cinch. Its accomplishment required the unity of *all* who were ready and able to help. The workers also learned that the Communists and the Left as a whole were made up of self-sacrificing, militant fighters. These were people who already had begun to blaze the new trail to industrial unionism.

Third, the Left-wing forces were close enough to the workers to sense the fresh breeze of activity and struggle that was blowing. They threw their best efforts into bringing about unity, first in separate industries and unions and then all along the line.

Fourth, the Right-wing leaders who favored unity believed that this could help them achieve their own personal ambitions of leadership over larger masses. They feared that an opposite course could isolate them and endanger their hold on their own rank and file.

Thus, the unity of that period was, not a marriage of love, but one of convenience. In politics, unlike matrimony, there is no such thing as "love." Unity is always the calculated product of "convenience"—or, "necessity."

The necessity arose in the political needs of the time which called for a common program of immediate action. These needs were (1) Unity to organize the unorganized; (2) Unity to counteract the catastrophic

effects of the depression on the standard of living of the workers and the people as a whole; (3) Unity for progressive social legislation (the so-called New Deal); (4) Unity behind the elementary demands of the Negro people for justice; and (5) Unity to defeat Hooverism and the Liberty-League reaction at home, and Hitler fascism abroad.

This was the period of the greatest militancy in the ranks of the workers. New white and Negro leaders sprang forth from the depths of the mass movement. A new spirit pervaded the land, generated in the first place by the new spirit emanating from labor. The Gulliver of labor was beginning to flex his muscles.

In contrast to those vigorous days, the C.I.O. in recent years has become stodgy and prematurely old. As it strokes its "bay-window" of fat treasuries, it drools nostalgically for the robust energy and peppery enthusiasm of the "good old days." Its convention orators plead for a return to the "fighting spirit of '38," little realizing what has destroyed this spirit. Even the younger in years, Reuther, in his report to the recent U.A.W. Convention, pleaded for the C.I.O. to once again "recapture the crusading spirit."

But what has happened to the "crusading spirit?" Why does the C.I.O. Samson find itself greatly shorn of its former virility and strength? Why has it faltered in the great task of completing the organization of the unorganized, particularly in the South, where more and

more Northern industry is fleeing? Why did it go down to defeat last November? These are questions the otherwise glib Reuther did not dare pose, nor answer.

We do not say that the militancy and crusading spirit of the past was brought about solely by the Left. We do say, and emphasize, that *what produced the unity with the Left also produced the fighting fire and fervor*. The destruction of this unity also destroyed this marvelous militant morale. Unity with the Left could be achieved only on the basis of a program of *forward advance for labor and the nation*; never of one of stagnation and retreat.

The crusading spirit arose from the vision of new fortresses to be conquered and new goals to be won. It arose from the setting of sights which fired the imagination, aroused the initiative, and inspired the confidence of great masses to accomplish great deeds. The army of labor was surging forward. It was winning important victories. An advancing army fighting for a just cause always has high spirit and high morale.

But when the enemy that the workers are asked to fight is no longer their exploiters, when Communism is made the enemy, when labor leaders spout the same phony slogans as monopolists, when much boasting and bragging are used to sell small gains and to cover up big failures, how can there be a crusading spirit? Who has ever heard of rank and file workers shouting with joy over the prospect of raiding other

unions? Over union brother fighting union brother? Over the adoption of "anti-Communist" clauses? Over support for the war program, when every honest worker instinctively abhors the very thought of another war and knows that, as a nation, we have no business in Korea? Little wonder the spirit flags! This crusading spirit can be **recaptured only** through a change in policy—a new policy which ends internecine warfare and unites labor behind a progressive program. To try to recapture "the spirit of '38," without the Left and without the kind of program which unity with the Left would represent is like trying to have a honeymoon without a bride. It just will not work.

The split which occurred in the C.I.O. between the Right and the Left was not over the question of ideology. It was over the question of policy, although, it must be emphasized, there is no Grand Canyon separating these two. If the conditions of sharper class struggle in the '30's provided the objective background for the unity which was forged in that period, the new situation following the war provided the objective background for the split which followed. This new situation can be summed up as follows:

During the period of the war the ruling class had "solved" the problem of economic crisis and mass unemployment. It had obtained for itself the highest profits in its history. This was followed by a period of post-war boom. Wall Street impe-

rialism intensified its drive for still greater profits through a program of world expansion and preparations for a new world war. This war was to be directed against the Soviet Union and the new People's Democracies. It was this program that Big Business set out to impose upon labor and the nation even if it had to be disguised in pious phrases about "defense of democracy" and the "free world." The material bribe with which its hook was baited was the seeming "prosperity" at the time. It offered the promise and illusion of a continuous prosperity with jobs, security and a higher standard of living.

The Right-wing labor leaders jumped at the chance to prove their loyalty to their masters. They asked labor to swallow the bait, hook, line and Truman. Instead of opposing the suicidal program of Wall Street, they gloried in their groveling role, content with the paltry crumbs falling from the over-flowing larder of war profits, thankful for the bones of respectability tossed their way by the master class.

It was this course of the top C.I.O. officialdom which sealed the doom of the Right-Left unity of the formative and youthful years of the C.I.O. The officialdom had to open up war against the Left. This was part of its contractual agreement with its masters. After all, how can you prepare a crusade for a world war against Communism and yet keep from making Communism the menace at home? But, as we have

shown, in the very crusade against Communism, the C.I.O. lost its crusading spirit, like Faust his soul.

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From all the foregoing it can be seen why the Right-wing leadership has been so zealous in its efforts to destroy the organized influence of the Left-wing and particularly the independent progressive-led unions. Its approach to Left-Right unity can be summed up in the phrase, "unity by extermination." This program for coping with the Left is not exactly new. Nor is there any reason for assuming that it will prove any more successful in this country than elsewhere. In fact, the American experience of the '20's proves the very opposite. All it can succeed in doing, if not stopped in time by the efforts of the rank and file, is to split the ranks of labor even more. It will demobilize and paralyze labor, just when labor needs unity like the world needs peace.

One thing is certain. All labor history bears out that the Left current can no more be liquidated than can the class struggle. The greater the intensity of this struggle, the greater must be the molten mass of class militancy pouring forth from the cauldron of experience. The greater also must be, at first, the instinctive, and then the conscious strivings of the workers toward class policies and class unity. It is this which is the Achilles heel of the labor officialdom. The class struggle cannot be exorcized. Even the labor leaders most enamoured with

American capitalism cannot deny that all signs point to much tougher times ahead.

Having tied labor to the catastrophic war program of Big Business, the very failure of this program and its consequent crisis in foreign and domestic policy for the ruling class must reflect itself inevitably in an even deeper crisis in the Red-baiting, splitting and pro-war policies of the labor officialdom. For these policies will more and more clash with the fundamental class interests of the workers and the best national interests of the country as a whole. This collision must express itself in a renewed forward surge of the workers toward real trade-union unity.

Already the first indications of a change are visible. Is this not the meaning of the recent action of the General Electric workers of Lynn, Mass.? These workers formerly were a part of the U.E. They are now part of the I.U.E., which split away from the U.E. a few years ago. These same workers who were taken in by Red-baiting at the time of the split have now demanded that their leadership take steps toward bringing about the unity of action of *all* national G.E. workers irrespective of union affiliation. When the I.U.E. President, the professional Red-baiter James Carey, took issue with the wording of their proposed unity resolution and suggested an amendment to make clear that this unity did not include the "Communists"—meaning by this the progressive U.E.—the workers roared their disapproval and

voted him down. Thus quite openly and definitely, they expressed their recognition of the new situation which is developing in the country and the need for unity across the board.

What is the meaning of the resolution adopted by the recent U.A.W. Convention? These resolutions voiced alarm at the growing threat of reaction and McCarthyism. They called for entering into "collective bargaining" with the Soviet Union with a view toward a settling of differences. They expressed the fear of an impending depression. They called for a people's political alliance to be initiated by labor. They decided to fight for model F.E.P.C. clauses in all contracts. Although these new positions were coupled with the wildest old type of Red-baiting, they reflect, nonetheless, the beginning of a change in the mood of the workers. One also could point to the expressed desire of both the C.I.O. Packinghouse Union and the A. F. of L. Butchers for united action and ultimate merger. Or to the progressive policy statement of the Packinghouse Union calling upon labor to play a new role in the fight for peace, democracy and prosperity. Or one could dwell on the great significance of the unity pact between the two formerly warring camps in the New York Painters Union. Or to the election victory of a number of progressive unity candidates in local unions of transport, shoe, etc.

These are the tiny, weak, young, early buds of Spring. They still may

become frost-bitten and even perish from the icy blasts of reactionary labor officialdom. But they do represent that which is new, developing and growing. They represent the *variabilities* from the established pattern, and hence are so all-important in understanding the *process* of change already at work. Above all, they indicate the *possibilities* which exist for making these budding moves the beginning of a *transition* to a *new situation* in the labor movement.

It is on these new possibilities and opportunities that the Left must base its thoughts and actions. While seasonal changes take place without the intervention and activity of man, political changes are the consequences of this activity. This is what the General Secretary of our Party, Eugene Dennis, meant when he said: "Favorable conditions do not . . . in themselves guarantee a favorable outcome. It is the human beings, and in the first place, the class-conscious workers, who must guarantee that what can be done, is done." This was also emphasized by A. H. Kendrick in his article in the December, 1952, *Political Affairs*.

One thing is certain. The transition to a new situation in the labor movement will not take place spontaneously or automatically. It requires the participation, intervention and strengthening of the Left current. Otherwise the Dubinskys and Reuthers may give voice to the

growing militancy of the workers in order to prevent *real* labor unity, to *prevent* the labor movement from playing a qualitatively new role in the affairs of the nation. We must not forget that the majority of Right-wing labor leaders do not want an anti-fascist, pro-peace, people's coalition led by labor. The Reuthers and Dubinskys speak for a new political coalition, but what they have in mind is a coalition which will be basically anti-Communist in character and thus incapable of uniting labor or saving the nation from fascism and war.

Thus both sides of the new developments in the labor movement must be seen for correct policy. For out of the new positive developments there also arise new dangers. Only a more conscious and a stronger Left and progressive current can help overcome the new dangers and transform existing new possibilities into actualities. Both the new possibilities and the new dangers must be kept in mind by the Left in its work to win the Right-led unions for progressive policies and in its work to strengthen the role of the progressive Left-led unions in the struggle for a united labor movement.

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The special problems of the independent progressive unions in their struggle for labor unity will be dealt with in the second half of this article to appear in next month's *Political Affairs*—Ed.