

Ys: PC, Tom L, Andy R, Nancy

December 5, 1978

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Dear Frank,

Shortly after your letter arrived Marvel came down with the flu. It was a severe case, further complicated by her chronic lung disorder. She is now on the mend, though, and my attention has returned to matters that had to be neglected for a time.

Your account of views expressed in various quarters of the Detroit UAW is helpful to me. It throws added light on the developing labor radicalization. The workers need all the help they can get in shaping a line through which to defend their class interests and to an increasing degree they will come to accept it from all who have something useful to offer. That gives us new openings. It confirms the importance of ~~miran~~ already having the party's turn to industry well under way, which enhances our future prospects.

Intensification of the capitalist offensive against the working class seems to be making things increasingly tough for reformists in the labor movement. Concessions are harder and harder to obtain. Instead, the bosses are stepping up efforts to reduce mass living standards, using every conceivable trick to do so. Mounting need results for the workers to find an effective way to fight back, and that can be accomplished only under new leadership.

Although the ruling class is backing away from its previous collaborative attitude toward the union bureaucrats, they are incapable of responding with a shift toward genuinely militant policies. Mostly they will do little more than whine about the capitalists' breaking off the past cozy relationship. Some -- especially in the social-democratic wing -- will talk about a change in line, having little in mind other than seeking a way to swing more weight inside the Democratic Party. Yet even such talk underlines the need for a change in labor's political course, and we can use it as a wedge for introduction of our class struggle line in the unions. At the same time we can cut two ways, like a bowie knife, by refuting the Stalinists' "antimonopoly coalition" pitch.

In my opinion selection of more militant leaders will most likely begin mainly at the local union level. These changes, resulting from intensified ferment in the ranks, will have an impact on lower strata of the bureaucracy. Pressures now felt from the top will become less and less effective because of growing counterpressures from the membership. Opportunists will begin to look two ways before deciding how to line up in a given situation. Potential will thereby arise for the development of rifts in the bureaucracy, and this can be used to serve rank and file ends along the lines, for example, that we followed in the Teamsters during the 1930s.

Changes in union officials will be relatively meaningless, of course, unless those newly elected base themselves on a fighting program serving the needs of the ranks. They cannot be the type who, once elected, attempt to assert authority over the membership in keeping with bureaucratic norms. They must be leaders who act democratically, functioning as representatives of growing left wing forces organized around a class struggle program. For such a program to serve today's urgent needs, moreover, it is imperative that it include the perspective of organizing independent labor political action. Therefore, it is necessary for us to carry on intensive propaganda around the labor party slogan, hammering on the subject from every conceivable angle. In doing so ongoing events will enable us to present increasingly convincing evidence that the developing social crisis imposes urgent need for the workers to take independent political action in their own name as a ~~new~~ class. Then, as quickly as it is found practical, we can launch agitation for concrete steps toward formation of a mass labor party.

Efforts to develop independent labor political action on a mass scale have a long history in this country, as you well know. In the book now in preparation I am undertaking to recount the main aspects of past developments in that connection. Hopefully, it will be of help to comrades now active in trade union work.

With all the best to Sarah and you from both of us,

Comradely,


Farrell

cc: Jack

PS: Ask Jack to tell you about my ~~talk~~ talk with Al Adler.

14 Charles Lane
New York, New York 10009

October 27, 1978

Dear Farrell:

My trip to Detroit, to visit Joan and make a vacation of it, turned out to be more interesting and educational (even more eventful) than I had expected. I looked forward to seeing some former friends and acquaintances, and everything I did in this respect turned out ~~to~~ better than my apprehensive anticipation of it. It also made my visit with Joan very pleasant and relaxed because she simply gave her car over to me and felt no responsibility for entertaining me or suiting her time to my needs.

I revisited my former place of work at GM Tech Center, spent two evenings and part of one day with McAdlen who described (quite accurately, I think, and with some insight) the present state of degeneration of the UAW bureaucracy, talked briefly with some local union officers and other minor officials, ~~and~~ had a chance to listen to the usual shop talk and political comments of a few rank and file UAW members, went to Solidarity House and looked around, saw the new Emil Masey library (not yet in order) at the UAW retirement center, and spent a very interesting day with one of the founders of the UAW (Chris Alston, Black and former CP member) who last year received a belated monthly "pioneer" pension pittance from the International Executive Board.

All this may seem unrelated and little more than a number of separate incidents, but for me the whole experience produced a different picture of the UAW than I had previously had. And I think some of what I saw applies to other unions and to our tasks in these unions.

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We used to talk about the difference between the case hardened top bureaucrats and the "secondary leadership," explaining the possibilities of working with and influencing minor officials and union office-holders in support of class-struggle actions. At one time I thought that under certain conditions of rank and file resurgence, it might be possible to win over a very large part -- maybe a majority -- of union officials from the rank of local president down. We may yet see this happen, but ~~before~~ before it does there must be a complete replacement of these minor officials in the course of working class radicalization. ~~There is,~~ There is, traditionally, a gradual change-over of local officials. But for the entire past period (since the AFL-CIO merger in 1955) this continuous change of local union officials every two or three years has been the replacement of some individuals by others, nearly all of the same type. And this process, ~~is~~ guided by the entrenched top officialdom, has produced the typical local union president whose main interest is to serve the district director who in turn is interested only in serving the International Executive Board. The membership regularly votes out the incumbents at the local level, but these replaced officials (in many instances) are rewarded with an appointed job.

We have been aware of this process for a long time and understood the debilitating effect of it on the union, but I had a chance this time in Detroit to see the final product. The UAW international representatives are a choice selection, a distillation of dregs from the local union office seekers and hangers-on of all sorts.

When Fraser first replaced Woodcock, some local union presidents

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and a few other minor officials (all of them at odds with their district directors and the international reps assigned to their locals) thought that Fraser would introduce some changes. They had a meeting with him to explain what they were up against, describing how the international reps mishandle local grievances to the benefit of the corporations.

Fraser listened to their problems and then he told them some of his own. He said he sympathized with them, would like to change the situation, but was unable to. He complained that he inherited a ~~group~~^{bunch} of drunks, that they are organized to protect each other, and that they have many friends in the UAW apparatus. Fraser understands the bureaucracy better than those who were asking him to make some quick changes, but it is unusual for anyone in his position to speak so candidly. (It may be ~~that~~ that what he actually said is now being remembered and interpreted by some of ~~the~~ those present who wish he had said it this way.) Of course, (desire or) he has no intention of making any changes at all, as was underscored most recently at his conference in Detroit to "reform" the Democratic Party.

There is ^tat present a very wide gap between the top bureaucracy and the rank and file, a vacuum which is not filled with what we used to call the "secondary leadership." These time-servers are as far removed from the membership as the top bureaucrats. This will change as class consciousness rises and radicalization of the union membership advances. The biannual election of local officials is bound eventually to replace this present sterile crop.

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The exceptions to the typical UAW local president also suffer from the same long erosive process that produced the present subservient type. There are none among them, even those who want to redress local grievances and who feel that the union is the victim of political pressure from the Democratic Party, who have any clear idea of what they (as president of a local union) can do, or what should be done. These "good guy" exceptions don't see what they can do about the incompetent company-minded international reps beyond appealing to Fraser to remove them.

Fraser's ~~re~~ complaints against "right wing" ~~re~~ influence in the Democratic Party has prompted most of the "oppositionists" (this is what they seem to prefer to call themselves) to talk about the need for a labor party, but that's about as far as they can go.

None of them have any idea of what a labor party is or can be, how it is a different kind of party representing the working class instead of the employers, and what can be done to organize this kind of party.

It certainly would be expecting too much of ~~xx~~ such people, developing as they have as mavericks in the union apparatus and with little experience beyond the union movement, to be able to give leadership to a labor party movement. They are aware of a rather general sentiment among union members (and they share that sentiment) for a break with the Democratic Party ("at least we shouldn't give them any more money") and the feeling that the unions ought to have their own party and elect their own politicians (not necessarily workers, but someone who will work for us.).

I found these ideas expressed by workers when I revisited the Tech Center (where I spent about three hours on the shop floor talking with first one and another until I thought the bosses might come around and tell me my time was up, but they remained very

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friendly and at the end I decided not to wear out my welcome). Some of the workers there thought I had come in to attend Fraser's conference. I told them I wasn't invited and had nothing to offer on how to reform the Democratic Party. None of them had ~~any~~ any suggestions along these lines either, but plenty to say about the present political situation. They told me that there is no longer any attempt to collect COPE dollars and anyway everybody had stopped giving. The labor party idea is nothing new to them ("that's what we need"), but they didn't have much to say about how it will be organized (maybe someday ~~the~~ "the union" will form a labor party).

At Solidarity House I saw "the union" at close range, and listened to several stories that illustrate the mentality of those who are comfortably enclosed in their small offices. Some of them still harbor grudges and slights of the 1947 faction struggle (and probably earlier ones too) that set the present course of the UAW. (Reuther had enough sense to include many former Leonard supporters in the apparatus, and there are still "original" Reutherites who resent this.)

My discussion with Alston after we left the "center of power" was more pleasant than the talk there, and more informative. He is an activist. After being squeezed out of the UAW and the ~~the~~ auto industry during the 1950s, he turned his attention to the rising civil rights movement. He became sympathetic to the SWP at that time (he told me he had first become interested in our party during World War II when he was drafted and became disillusioned with the ~~the~~ CP), and he used to speak occasionally at our ~~the~~ Detroit forum on his experiences as a Black UAW local president, ~~and~~ in the early years of the war, and on the problems of Black people in the post war years.

This time we talked about his experiences in the

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early years of organizing the UAW . . . from the 1933 Briggs strike until the 1935 UAW convention.

He likes to talk about the ~~importance~~ importance of the radicals in those years -- the CP which he belonged to, but also the Proletarian Party, the IWW, socialists (the Mat Smith variety and others), and some local radical groups that I never heard of. He said they were all trying to organize auto workers, and that nothing would have been done without them. Of course, the CP even with its wrong policy made the greatest gains. It wasn't able to organize its TUUL auto union, but it recruited to the party in the process of trying. It had one central idea, Alston recalls, which was summarized in the slogan "rank and file industrial unionism." The CP recruited on this idea and ~~assembled~~ assembled a small cadre that later became influential in the UAW. (Alston tells some amusing stories about the "union meetings" they used to have with a dozen party members and maybe one or two others present. But those meetings were recruiting sessions for the party, the "one or two others" being brought into party membership in many instances.)

Alston, like others with experience in the union movement, emphasizes that nothing is likely to happen in the unions today until a radical party is able to give some leadership.

The SWP has a good reputation, and is a ^{credible} ~~candidate~~ candidate for leadership. Everyone I met who has had any experience with the party in recent years spoke well of it. Alston is working with the Detroit branch on the Koka tour, and is trying to interest some members of his immediate family in the party. Freddie Valle contributes financially to PRDF and told me that he is trying to interest Rose in some of our activities in order that ~~he~~ they can then be of more help to the party.

Fred told me that the CP is not visible in the

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Detroit area. I know there are some members in the UAW -- mostly oldtimers -- but he says they don't do anything. And the party so far as he knows doesn't conduct any public activity that attracts attention. Alston confirmed this. He knows Tommy Dennis since their pre-war days in the CP and remains personally friendly. Dennis for several years was the leading Black CP representative in Detroit. He's now in New York. According to Alston the CP holds educational seminars for members and potential recruits, but these are not successful in instances he cited because of a kind of "family atmosphere" in the CP that turns away sympathizers who are made to feel like outsiders.

Despite these reports about the CP's low profile and its failures, I know that the CP is busy among the secondary UAW officialdom. The organization of the shorter workweek conference earlier this year was their work, and probably would not have been held without their initiating efforts. Nothing came of it and I don't think the CP gained much from it. But it showed that they are present in the union and trying, within the limitations of their politics, to present a program for union building that will attract members to them.

Right now attention is focused on the unions. What will they do in the negotiations next year when Carter's austerity program will protect the corporations against a wage raise? What will the unions do to protect their members against inflation and against no-strike legislation? These are big questions for union members who are not really politically conscious and haven't yet begun to radicalize. These questions are also in the minds of workers who are not in unions and have no protection. Most workers, including union members, do not identify personally with the unions as their own organizations. The unions are supposed to fight for better wages. But will they? Can they?

There is a similarity between the need of workers now

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and in the 1930s. Then it was the need to organize. And that need became generally recognized. The question then was how to organize the unorganized masses, ~~and~~ and who would do it? Today the need is for economic and political protection. The unions are expected to provide this because they seem to be powerful. I think it is becoming generally recognized that the unions need their own ~~political~~ political weapon (or some political weapon) for this purpose. The question now is how to forge that weapon, and who will do it?

There are three main answers offered. Fraser and the social democrats (DSOC) say reform the democratic party. The Stalinists say a "peoples party" coalition is needed. We say the urgent need of the union movement today is to build a labor party.

To say labor party in the unions today gets an immediately favorable response from the ranks. But that only introduces the problem. How will this labor party come about? What do we do to get a labor party?

I think our comrades in the unions should start to explain the need for a labor party and how the ~~ranks~~ ranks can be mobilized in actions that will bring a labor party into being. And this propoganda and agitation for a labor party should ~~not be~~ not be ~~the~~ the responsibility of our comrades in unions alone. It is a very appealing plank in our election platform that all our candidates should explain, urge all union militants to think seriously about, and begin to act upon.

Our labor party tactic at this juncture in the union struggle can be our most successful means of recruiting to the S.P. We should review and reopen the 1938 discussion on the labor party question as a means of educating our present ranks and preparing them for the central task that the union movement faces today.

As you know, I have been of this opinion for some time. I am more convinced of it now than when we talked

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at the start of the year. I don't know if it was anything I learned while in Detroit that strengthened my conviction, or just the chance to look ~~in~~ on the unions there in the special circumstances that I enjoyed.

Just before leaving for Detroit I finished (in draft) a rather long essay (100 pgs in MS) on the three main political tendencies in the labor movement -- social democracy, stalinism, and revolutionary socialism. This was prompted initially by the squabble that has flared up between the social democrats and stalinists (even getting into the pages of Meany's Federationist), and by the large number of recent books about unions in the 1930s and in the post-war years. (I haven't seen or heard of much being written about the unions during World War II). Anyway, after reviewing what the social dems and stalinists say about each other I decided it would be only proper to try to explain what revolutionary socialist say. We have some very good books that tell the whole story. They are Labor's Giant Step, the four-book series on the Minneapolis Teamster movement, and the recent addition titled Out Now. I wanted to include Fred's book because it is a fine description of how the SWP learned to apply the class struggle method and policy that was developed in the insurgent union movement of the 1930s to the mass movement against the ~~the~~ Vietnam war in the 1960s.

When I left for Detroit I took my essay along and your introductory chapter to the new book (s) with the intention of trying to do some work on my own thing and writing to you about your work. But I never got started on any of this.

Now I only want to say that your beginning is a good way to popularize the fundamental concepts of Marxism and encourage young workers to begin as you did with what is basic. I think it will encourage serious study of the classics and serve as a guide to that study. A

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young worker joining our party and reading what you tell about your own experience and education will surely say (probably to himself or herself), "If this is the way Dobbs did it, I can too."

I only saw this chapter shortly before Oberlin and intended ~~to~~ to write to you then at greater length but got delayed. I notice now, since Oberlin, that you are receiving the fraction ~~of~~ minutes and other material on the unions.

A day or so before I left for Detroit Jack mentioned to me that he had not heard from you for some time, and I haven't seen him now since his return from Calif. But in the next few days I expect to have a discussion on some of the matters I've related here in this letter. (which I didn't think would be this long when I started)

Warmest personal regards to you and Marvel . . .

Comradely,



Frank