

CHAPTER XII

THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

TRADE unions are the primary organizations of the working class. It is in the unions that the workers learn the first lessons of organization and struggle, without which there can be no development of revolutionary consciousness. Consequently, Communists have always emphasized that one of their central tasks is to work within the trade unions. We cannot win the majority of the working class for our program unless we base all of our large-scale, united front work upon united activities within the unions.

The American Communists have always kept these principles, worked out and stressed by Marx and Lenin, in the foreground of their activities. For years they strove to organize the unorganized, fought for industrial unionism, for amalgamation, for all the issues that are now being advocated by the progressive wing within the American Federation of Labor. The great campaign carried on around these issues by the Communists in 1921-1928 inside the A. F. of L., under the leadership of William Z. Foster, the present Chairman of the Communist Party, is a bright page of labor history. They are working in every union with all progressives to strengthen the fight against the reactionaries in the organization, and to build strong fighting unions having militant programs and genuine trade union democracy. For we Communists realize that a strong, organized labor movement is the main bulwark against the rise of fascism in this coun-

try, and the basis for a mass Farmer-Labor Party. The trade unions are schools in which the workers learn the elementary lessons of the class struggle, and through which they grow into more conscious and more effective fighters against capitalism.

At the present time the American labor movement has reached the decisive turning point in its history. The 55th Convention of the American Federation of Labor marked the beginning of a new era for the trade unions in this country. The struggles that took place at the convention between the reactionary leadership of Green, Woll, Frey and Hutcheson, and the industrial union bloc, under the leadership of John L. Lewis, the head of the United Mine Workers Union, were among the most important in the whole history of the American Federation of Labor. The old policies of collaboration with the bosses, of refusing to organize the mass production industries, of crippling the working class by keeping it within the rigid mold of narrow craft unions, were under severe fire. The hope and desire of the workers for a strong labor movement, able to fight for their immediate economic interests, and able to act as a powerful barrier against the growing menace of fascism, were reflected in the policies of the industrial union bloc and especially in the more militant group which supported Francis Gorman in his fight for a Labor Party.

We must remember that only around four million workers are in the organized labor movement. This is less than twelve percent of the thirty-five million members of the American working class. The mass production industries, like automobile, rubber and radio, are largely unorganized. And in the basic industry of the country—iron and steel—the trusts have herded the overwhelming majority of the workers into company unions. There is much to be done, and it

must be done quickly, if the decisive sections of the American working class are to be drawn into the labor movement.

The unorganized condition of the American workers, their abominable working conditions and low wages, are a direct result of the unwillingness and inability of the central leadership of the American Federation of Labor to organize effective resistance against the attacks of the employers. From the early months of 1933 the workers swarmed into the unions, and participated in some of the most militant strikes in the history of American labor. But these workers, seeking organization and ready to give their lives—as many of them did—to build their union, found obstacles placed in their way by the leading bureaucrats. Instead of being led in a struggle against the employers, they were forced into innumerable “truces”, which brought them nothing but blacklisting and wage cuts.

The central leadership of the American Federation of Labor, by collaborating with the strikebreaking mechanism of the N.R.A., lost and sold out strikes, and thus enabled the capitalists to carry through their attacks against the unions and the living standards of the workers. In auto, steel, and rubber, to cite only a few examples, it was Green who capitulated to the bosses and prevented effective strikes that would have brought mass unions and better conditions into these industries. It is these reactionary bureaucrats who are mainly responsible for the fact that over three million workers in the largest plants in the country are forced to belong to company unions, and that under the New Deal company unions have flourished as never before.

We must understand the nature of these developments if we are to grasp the significance of the serious rift that took place in the leadership of the American Federation of Labor at its last convention. More was involved than just the

question of industrial unionism versus craft unionism. The industrial union bloc was under pressure by the workers who bitterly resent the wholesale onslaught by the bosses since the nullification of the N.R.A. by the Supreme Court. There has been the most brutal violence by police and militia against miners, longshoremen, textile workers, against all strikers. It was only where the unions were strong that they could meet this latest challenge of the employers and beat back their attacks. The miners, for example, who are strongly organized, were able to win some concessions in their latest agreement. But in those places where the workers are largely unorganized, as in the retail and distribution trades, in textile centers in the South, etc., there have been severe cuts in wages, the lengthening of the work week up to sixty and seventy hours, and a general return to the worst aspects of sweated industry.

Hence, the dark shadow of reaction hung over the whole 55th Convention of the American Federation of Labor. The more progressive leaders clearly expressed their growing fear of fascism and the destruction of the trade union movement. Through their own experiences, through attacks on their own unions by the "fascist-minded" employers, they were beginning to understand that the continuance of their old policies and methods would lead to the destruction of all the unions. This was expressed by John L. Lewis when he said:

"There are forces at work in this country that would wipe out, if they could, the labor movement of America, just as it was wiped out in Germany or just as it was wiped out in Italy.

"There are those of us who believe that the best security against that menace and against that trend and against that tendency is a more comprehensive and more powerful labor movement. We believe that the way should be paved so that those millions of workers who are clamoring for admission into our councils might

be made welcome upon the basis that they understand and that they believe suited to their requirements."

This same note was sounded in its clearest form in a speech by Francis Gorman. He had learned that the New Deal was no barrier to the development of reaction, and therefore he drew the logical conclusion that the workers must break from the two old capitalist parties and build their own independent labor party. It is of the utmost significance that labor leaders like John L. Lewis, Philip Murray, Sidney Hillman and others sounded a warning about the development of greater terror and incipient fascism. Their emphasis on the menace of fascism indicated the deep-going concern of the workers about this most important problem. The anti-fascist feeling was so strong that even Matthew Woll, who had openly headed the reactionary National Civic Federation for years, did not dare defend his activities. He resigned as head of this open-shop outfit before the Convention adopted the resolution introduced by the delegates from the Miners Union:

"Resolved, that no officer of the American Federation of Labor shall act as officer of the National Civic Federation, or be a member thereof."

In similar fashion the most heated issue at the Convention, that of industrial unionism, was not debated on any abstract grounds. John L. Lewis, as the spokesman for the industrial union bloc, showed that the old craft unions were incapable of organizing the millions of unorganized, and that industrial unions were bound up with the life and death of the whole trade union movement. He correctly pointed out that organizing the unorganized will be the chief factor in determining the ability of the American masses to defeat the threat of fascism. Thus an issue which had once been advo-

cated only by Communists became the fundamental issue before the whole labor movement.

The strength of the industrial union bloc, which drew eleven thousand out of a total thirty thousand votes at the convention, indicates that the decisive turn within the American Federation of Labor is against the traditional policy of class collaboration of the central leadership. The vote on this question, as well as on the National Civic Federation, hit at the roots of the whole Gompers-Green policy of playing ball with the bosses. It showed that the overwhelming sentiment of the trade union membership is for a policy of militant struggle, and against the old way of retreating three steps every time the boss advanced one.

There are many important conclusions to be drawn from these events at the 55th Convention. We saw that the American Federation of Labor was divided into two main camps over the fundamental issue of industrial unionism, that is, of the deeper issue of organizing the unorganized. The two camps tended to line up on opposite sides on many other issues vital to the labor movement; trade union democracy, the organization of Negro workers, the organization of the youth, the Labor Party, and even on the Red issue—the first draft of the anti-Red amendment was withdrawn by the reactionaries because it faced certain defeat at the hands of the industrial union bloc.

The Lewis-Howard-Hillman-Dubinsky group, through the Committee for Industrial Organization, is fighting for a fundamental issue in the life of the American working class. Unless the unorganized workers are organized into industrial unions, we will not be able to advance the class struggle, strengthen the American working class, and successfully resist reaction and fascism. We Communists support these aims of the industrial union bloc. It is true that we have no

guarantees as to how some of these leaders will eventually act, whether they will not act against the true interests of the workers in the future as they have in the past. But this is not the fundamental question at the moment. What is most important now is that every progressive and radical worker must build the labor movement, and this can best be done through the method of industrial unionism.

The struggle for industrial unionism demands the unity of all workers on the basis of trade union democracy and class struggle policies. Obviously such a program is incompatible with Red-baiting. Communists, Socialists, and other militant class-conscious workers are a necessary factor in organizing the unorganized. The leaders of the industrial union bloc must unite all the workers in their own unions, including Socialists and Communists, to fight against the reactionaries, who will try to use the red herring as a way of splitting the forces of the workers. Furthermore, if the struggle for industrial unions is to be consistent and successful, then those unions which are backing the drive must see that full trade union democracy exists in their own organizations as well as in the new unions that are to be organized.

The Communists will support, as they did in the Convention, every move of the progressives that will aid the interests of the labor movement. But we will not be bound by limitations that the leaders of the industrial union bloc may try to impose upon our independent activity. We will support these leaders in every step that they take to organize the masses against the employers and against the reactionaries within the labor movement. At the same time we will tell the masses that Roosevelt will not save them from fascism. We will try to mobilize the masses in their own organizations, with the leaders or without them, for the Farmer-Labor Party. We will fight against every measure they take

to restrict the democratic rights or the initiative of the workers within the unions.

We have not forgotten the past records of these present progressive leaders, but we welcome all sincere change on their part. In a world where such momentous changes are taking place it is no surprise to us that the attitudes of people, including leaders of labor unions, also change. Since the masses are moving Left, taking the first steps toward breaking with the capitalist parties, some of the leaders may go along with the masses. But we make our decisions with our eyes open and in consultation with the toilers. We shall judge all groups in the trade unions and all leaders of trade unionists by their deeds: how they guide the workers in their own unions, how they organize the unorganized, how they fight for industrial unions, how they struggle against company unionism, and how they endeavor to create that Farmer-Labor Party which is so vital to all the interests of every American toiler.

It will be no easy task to build unions in the open-shop mass production industries. The employers use company unions, highly developed spy systems, and they will not hesitate to use terror and violence to smash all attempts at organization. Here we Communists can teach other workers from our many experiences. We can show them that old-fashioned methods are no longer effective. We must convince them that the active builders of the unions in the shops must not be unduly exposed before the union is strong, and thus create a situation in which the union is smashed. We must emphasize the necessity for working in the company unions. The whole steel industry was recently stricken with fear by developments within its company unions, where workers came together and drew up demands for wage increases and vacations. This only emphasizes the necessity of

penetrating the company unions and convincing the workers that they should join the trade unions.

It is necessary to rouse the workers to fight against the present policy of the American Federation of Labor bureaucracy which refuses to lead the workers in struggle against the steel and other trusts. The unorganized workers will not be attracted to unions, if all that is held out to them is the prospect of dues payments to line the pockets of some chair-warming bureaucrat.

The working class is ready for struggle. It is ready for organization. The decisive task before the labor movement is to enroll these millions of eager and courageous workers into the ranks of the organized labor movement. We Communists will do all in our power to cooperate with every progressive force so that we can make the trade unions invincible organizations of the working class. The decisive sector on the anti-fascist front is within the trade unions. If we do not win victory there, if we do not organize the millions of unorganized, if we do not make the unions into fighting organizations of struggle, if we do not stop the degradation of living standards, then we cannot hope to repel successfully the advance of fascism.