

On the City Committee Report and the Need for a Political Perspective

by F. Forest

1. Depoliticalization

The City Committee's report contends that the Party is at the crossroads and defines the crossroads to be the decision, to reindustrialize the party, or go back to the old system of white collar jobs. That is an unpostponable task for the Party, but a perspective cannot be passed off for an analysis of past achievements and past failures. If there is one thing which we did achieve, it was the turn to proletarianization. 75% of our membership, or pretty much all that could be proletarianized, were located in industry. Our membership went into industry wholeheartedly and enthusiastically took their place among the organized proletariat. Yet the indispensable turn to industrialization did not bring commensurate political results in terms of party recruitment. Instead of practically ignoring the question of the small results gotten from our industrialization, it is this precisely which the Committee's report should have analyzed, not merely as an account of the past, but as a guide to our future reindustrialization and the results we should expect from that.

This was also the major problem at the last convention of the New York local. I pointed out then that unless we politicalized our work we could not expect the future recruitment drives to be any more successful than the past ones. Though I was attacked by the C.C. members for this analysis, the report, brought in by the Political Committee to the city convention, announced just such a turn to politicalizing our trade union work. However, the turn was never really made. It could not have been made without overhauling all our work and not only in the trade unions, but in Labor Action, and within our own ranks for in the process of proletarianization we had lost precisely that which should have been our special contribution to the trade union movement: the line and revolutionary face of the vanguard party. What clearer demonstration of our depoliticalization than the absence in the Committee's report of even any mention of the trade union turn, not to speak of an analysis as to how the New York local carried out this turn?

The process of depoliticalization is glaringly revealed in the lamentable state of our internal education. Yet not a single of the following facts gets even a cursory reference in the report:

(1) Never --and I am no novice in the revolutionary movement-- have I known of a case where a political position is adopted by the P.C. and its resolution, along with an opposition one, is published, and yet the central local of the Party does not arrange a single city-wide discussion, as was the case here with the Resolutions on the Negro Question. This question is especially vital to the New York local which is trying to get a foothold in the largest Negro community in the country. Yet the first time I made a motion for a city-wide discussion on the Negro Resolutions, it was rejected on the ground that Com. Coolidge was on tour. (Was there not a single member of the PC supporting that thesis who could present his position "as well"?) The second time I presented the motion the election campaign was being launched, and the motion was again rejected, this time on the ground that the campaign left no time for discussion. Evidently there is

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still no need felt for clarity on the political position on the Negro question -- at least no efforts are exerted toward the first, elementary point for this work: a city-wide discussion of the opposing positions, though Harlem is made a concentration point in New York work.

(2) I have never known of a case where the main local of a revolutionary party does not have a single city-wide discussion preceding the calling of a national conference, as was the case with the New York local preceding the Active Workers Conference.

(3) The disdain for theoretical questions stems, of course, from the National Committee; the New York local only reflects that attitude, as seen from the handling of the German comrades' retrogression thesis. (Cf. Capitalist Barbarism or Socialism, N.Y., Oct. 1944.) Consider the prominence and advertisement given this work, and then contrast it (1) to the few discussions held, and (2) the lack of responsibility felt by the P.C. to explain its position which evidently differed from Com. Shachtman's, who applauded the German thesis. It differed also from the German comrades who, the editorial note stated, arrived at their position from motivations of their own. At the same time it opposed Com. Johnson who rejected the retrogressionist theory in its entirety. No wonder then that the CC arranged only two meetings, which, strictly, cannot be called city-wide meetings since attendance was purely on a voluntary basis. Furthermore, these were never followed up, although the City Organizer announced that the two meetings held on the question were the first "in a series".

(4) Finally, consider the unity negotiations with the SWP. The first time the membership heard of these was through the press. Then a meeting was called and a discussion held. New developments occurred, and another meeting called, but no time for discussion arranged. Since it was only an informational meeting it seemed clear that other meetings should be held where the membership could express its views. Moreover, the PC as well as the CC is most surely obliged to draw a balance sheet of the unity negotiations.

All this is not accidental. It flows from lack of political clarity and a wavering political line which tries to plunge the party into activity without giving it a clear perspective. Sometimes in fact the activity is undertaken as a sort of substitute for political clarification on the state of the party. Such was the case, for example, with the launching of the election campaign.

2. The three tendencies in the City Committee

Before the election campaign was undertaken the CC was in the midst of a series of discussions regarding the failure of our recruitment drive. These discussions revealed three lines of argument, characteristic of the three tendencies in the Party nationally on the question of party building:

(1) Com. Lund's idea of what our party should be and act like -- a small edition of a mass party -- finds its perfect expression in the C.C. in Com. Hoffman, whose idea of doing away with the "dichotomy" between our agitational weekly organ and the propaganda party which we are is best expressed in her own words: "Make the W.P. more

like the L.A."

(2) Com. Shachtman's constant complaint of lack of forces and attempt violently to combine the agitation and propaganda stages through the creation of a "cadre" (read: faction) finds its most characteristic expression in Com. Craine, who thinks the failure of the New York local to make greater progress is more or less a question of whether we have one or two full-time organizers.

(3) On the other hand, there is Com. Johnson, who clearly predicted the consequence of a lack of clarity on the type of party we are when he wrote: "Clarity on this is the first task of the party to check confusion and avoid frustration...At the present stage the WP can only be a propaganda organization whose main purpose must be to propagandize socialism and to make socialists. All Marxist parties aim at raising the class consciousness of workers at all times. But to circumscribe the task of the WP by this is Utopian and results in a steady dilution of socialism. The consequence is a growing loss of identity, both external and internal of the WP as a revolutionary party." (Cf. Building the Bolshevik Party)

In terms of New York local problems I expressed these same ideas when I attributed the failure of the recruitment drive to the depoliticalization of the Party itself as reflected in (1) its failure to respond politically to current events both on the national scene (National Service Act, Reconversion, etc.) and on the international arena (European events, growth of Fourth International, etc.); (2) in its failure to integrate our trade union and political work into one cohesive line; (3) the apoliticalization of our public organ which reaches the vast majority of the workers we are trying to influence, and (4) lack of directives from the National Committee.

The Lundites also complained (1) against the NC for lack of directives and lack of socialist articles in the LA, and (2) against Com. Craine for her "conservatism" (Fenwick's phrase) and her failure to put forward the face of the party by issuing leaflets, holding more public meetings, etc. They considered the cleavage between themselves and Com. Craine deep enough to insist on two separate reports, though by the time these reached the membership there was as much difference between them as between Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and hence the necessity for two reports seemed completely inexplicable to the membership.

These differences the Committee's report now glosses over. It does not even mention the novelty of two separate reports. Instead it aims to create the impression that the difference was only with the Johnsonites. "Depoliticalization" as a cause for the failure of the recruitment drive, it states, was rejected by the majority of the CC. Then it continues to sum up the other differences thus: "Actually what the CC was doing here was expressing the need for a change of functioning...The comrades recognized that we were slow in making a turn to open activity which was opened by the pending end of the war and the end of the war itself." This is putting some very clear-cut hindsight consciousness into the former dispute. It clears the decks for an attack on the Johnsonites as the only critics. There is only one thing wrong with this impression: it does not reflect the true situation. The truth of the matter is that not only were three tendencies seen in the former discussion on recruitment,

but these reappeared again when the present report was read.

The fact that all was patched up in the interim period only proves the unprincipled character of the Lundites. They were irresponsible in insisting on two separate reports previously when there were no major differences between themselves and Com. Craine. They are as irresponsible now in voting on a single report which they worded the first to characterize as "glib" and as lacking a realization that "the party is in a crisis". The office opinion Com. Jensen said she still held even when the report was rewritten, or so she said when I asked her whether her vote meant that she now does not consider the party to be in a crisis.

3. The crisis in the party

The party is in a crisis. After a year's intensive activity in a situation favorable to the growth of the revolutionary party, our New York local can record a net gain of only 15 members (27 were recruited but 14 were dropped), and a vote of some 800 (as contrasted to 4000 the SWP got). Under such conditions the membership has a right to ask two questions: (1) what accounts for the miserable showing in recruitment despite the new turn to politicalize our trade union work, and (2) how does it happen that the election campaign, for which all other activities were practically stopped, during which we distributed 100,000 copies of the LA carrying a special election page, and sold 10,000 copies of Jobs for All, 5000 of the Anti-Jim Crow pamphlet and 5,000 of the pamphlet on Socialism got such poor results. It cannot be that the American proletariat is backward and not ready to accept a revolutionary program since the Trotskyist label polled the largest vote it ever did in New York,

The CC report answers neither of these questions satisfactorily. The first, as I showed, it barely attempts to answer; the second it answers by the assertion of the rather obvious fact that the 5:1 relationship in the strength and influence of the respective parties. That assertion, no matter how belligerently made, does not explain either why our vote was so small or why the SWP is growing faster than we for the truth is that the relationship between the two parties is not the 60:40 it was at the time of the split. Why our party, without a bureaucracy such as characterizes the SWP, should record progress at a snail's pace is not answered by such evasions. Nor surely is the answer to be found in the organizational practices of the SWP. No, the answer is political. The truth is that they have a revolutionary perspective and we do not. The truth is that, regardless of what you think of their political line, nobody reading their press can fail to see that it is the press of the SWP, while anyone reading the LA makes no such connection between it and the WP.

While political questions are not within the province of a city convention, it is important at least to indicate the real reason for the crisis in the party's morale. It is hard to build a party that has no revolutionary perspective. Com. Born admitted, for example, that the pessimism prevalent in the party was due to the "failure" (his quotes) of the European revolution to take place after such a catastrophic war. He argued, however, that that ought to have a "sobering" rather than a demoralizing effect. Com. Craine adds that it would be "irresponsible" for us to see revolutions "around every corner", that the policy of our party is a "responsible"

and realistic one. I am not reopening the European question or the question of world revolution, which, no doubt, will be thrashed out at the national convention, but insofar as it has a direct effect on our New York work, one thing must be seen in all its significance. Our vacillating line on the developments in Europe has had a demoralizing effect on our membership which feels frustrated and begins to doubt its own effectiveness. It is this which accounts for the dropping out of some of the older members. It is this which accounts for our poor results in recruitment. Our tail-endist first reaction to the U.A.W. strike fully exemplifies this.

The incapacity to understand the full significance of the strike only climaxed the lack of a political line which has been characteristic of our weekly organ for the past two-three years and which can by no stretch of imagination be blamed upon the two-three months unemployment in the ranks. The report states that the let-down feeling in the membership is due to its deindustrialization and consequent failure to be on the picket line. If every one of our comrades had been on the picket line, how, pray, could that have changed the line of Labor Action when it, despite the long preparations by the union for the strike, despite its open announcement of its strategy, which included the revolutionary slogan of Open the Books, despite the fact that the slogan had been a part of our transitional program and thus should have had us prepared to analyze its socialist content, nevertheless came out following the outbreak of the strike, devoid of political content? It is not up to our membership that is ready to do everything. It is a question of political line.

The party is at the crossroads, but the crossroads are not those defined by the CC. There is not a single member who disagrees with the need of reindustrializing the party. What is in question is the type of party we are building and hence the method of building it. Unless we get that clear our plans will go up in smoke. It is not merely the face of the party that is missing, but the party itself, that is, the consciousness of its vanguard role. Lack of forces does not explain why the forces that we have have lost that consciousness in their daily work. Lack of forces too is a political question. Neither returning veterans nor any forces that we may get from the SWP will solve the politico-organizational problem of building the Bolshevik party and is as poor a substitute for a party perspective as was Cannon's slogan for 30 organizers and \$10,000.

4 December 18, 1945.
