

The Party Trade Union During Ten Years

By WM. Z. FOSTER

(continued from September issue)

PART II.

THE ERA OF "PROSPERITY"

IN the era of so-called "prosperity," which may be said to have lasted from 1923 to the middle of 1928, the position of our Party in the trade union struggle of the workers was a difficult one. American Imperialism was rapidly developing its productive forces and, in the face of a war-crippled Europe, the American capitalist class made gigantic strides in capturing the world markets and in establishing its imperialist hegemony over colonial and semi-colonial peoples.

In this period of capitalists began greatly to intensify the rationalization of industry. Speed and ever more speed in production became the slogan. The success of the rationalization drive required the wiping out or crippling of all organized resistance by the workers in the industries. The employers, victorious in smashing the key sections of the labor movement in the great post-war offensive, followed up this big advantage by systematically company-unionizing the remaining trade unions and degenerating them into adjuncts of the capitalist producing mechanism and the State.

The trade union bureaucrats at the head of the A. F. of L. and the big independent unions fell in line altogether with this program. They became the most brazen rationalization and war agents of American Imperialism. Almost immediately after the loss of the great national railroad shopmen's strike in 1922 they began to mold the trade unions in the direction of company unionism. They gave up completely even the faint show of resistance they had once made against the employers. They condemned in theory and practice the strike and all other forms of militant struggle. Intensified class collaboration, based upon the furtherance of the employers' rationalization and war programs, became the central policy of the A. F. of L.

More and more production became the gospel of the labor bureaucrats as well as of the capitalists themselves. Only by producing more, said these misleaders, could the capitalists be induced to make concessions to the workers. These ideas, summed up under

the term of "union management co-operation," were first crystallized in the B. & O. Plan on the railroads and later, under the name of "the new wage policy," adopted as the central policy of the A. F. of L. in the Atlantic City convention.

The surrender of the labor bureaucrats was complete. They became the speed-up agents of the bosses. Their aim was to oust company unionism and to substitute trade unionism for it, by turning the trade unions practically into company unions. They accepted wholesale and propagated widely the "prosperity" illusions advocated by the Chases, Lauckes, Tugwells, Carvers, etc., to the effect that the workers were becoming capitalists, that they were buying out the industries, etc. It was the era of labor banking, of trade union capitalism. The labor bureaucrats followed up all this by a complete surrender to the old political parties. They also turned tail on the Plumb Plan. Through the Pan American Federation of Labor, they acted as the willing tools of American Imperialism in Labor America. Their hatred of Soviet Russia even outdid that of many capitalists themselves.

As a necessary part of this class collaboration, the labor bureaucrats delivered a bitter offensive against the left-wing in the old unions who were urging the masses to reject class collaboration and to adopt a policy of struggle. This offensive, amounting to a liquidation of democracy in the unions, was marked by wholesale expulsions, blacklists, and gangster terrorism.

The Progressive and Socialist Party leaders, who in the years 1919-23 made a modest show of opposition to the A. F. of L. leadership, also surrendered outright to the employers' rationalization and war program. They joined with the extreme right. They repudiated their labor party demand, gave up amalgamation, and developed into bitter opponents of Soviet Russia. The Fitzpatrick's, Hillman's, Cramer's, etc., became the most vicious enemies of the left-wing and the most ardent advocates of the worst forms of class collaboration. The Socialist-controlled needle trades unions, in their daily life, became practically indistinguishable from the most reactionary A. F. of L. organizations. They took the lead in expelling the left elements.

During this whole period, the masses of workers were in a state of relative lethargy. The great industrial activity took the edge off their discontent. Besides, they were weakened by the big post-war defeats and confused by the treachery of the trade union leaders. The trade union movement had lost much of its militancy and fighting spirit. It was a period of relatively few strikes, save in the mining, textile, and needle industries, which suffered most keenly from rationalization and general crisis.

These years, following the great strike period of 1919-23, were difficult ones for the Party and the T. U. E. L. in trade union work. The masses were not in a fighting mood. We faced a bitter offensive from the labor bureaucrats and the bosses. We lost many valuable contacts. The T. U. E. L. dwindled away to a skeleton.

Nevertheless, we conducted many sharp and effective struggles, principally in the mining, needle, and textile industries. The mining fight, which raged continuously from 1922, culminated in the big "Save-the-Union" conference of 1125 delegates in Pittsburgh, April 1st 1928, and finally resulted in the formation of the National Miners Union. The textile struggle, the high points of which was the great Passaic and New Bedford strikes, led to the formation of the National Textile Workers Union. The struggle in the needle trades, which constitutes the hardest fought battle in the history of the American labor movement, reached its high points in the Furriers' and Cloakmakers' strikes of 1926, in which we delivered heavy defeats to the bosses and the Socialist bureaucrats, and which ultimately led to the establishment of the Needle Trade Workers Industrial Union. In these battles the T. U. E. L. militants first came forward as actual mass strike leaders. Besides these struggles, the T. U. E. L. forces led many a stubborn battle in strikes, union elections, conventions, etc., in all the A. F. of L. unions.

During the so-called "prosperity" period we made serious errors which militated against the growth of the Party and the success of our work. These mistakes and wrong tendencies were like those made during the period of the great post-war capitalist offensive, predominantly of a right-wing character. For the most part they owed out of the prevalent over-estimation of the power of American Imperialism, and under-estimation of the possibilities of Communists to lead mass struggles of the workers in this period. Our own party ranks were by no means entirely free from capitalist "prosperity" illusions, as Lovestone now eloquently proves.

A basic error was in the direction of trade union legalism; that is, a tendency to confine our struggle within the status and limitations of the old unions. This manifested itself first of all by an over-correction of the early dual unionism, and the setting up almost as a fetish, unity with the old unions. It was this tendency that Losovsky later condemned as "dancing quadrilles" around the A. F. of L. We confined our work almost entirely to the old unions, thereby neglecting the work of organizing the unorganized. This wrong policy received its most striking expression in the mistake (condemned by the C. I.) of affiliating the Passaic

textile strikers to the A. F. of L., even at the expense of eliminating the Communist leadership. It also expressed itself in the needle trades and various other industries under different forms. Our fear of dual unionism was one reason why we failed to build up the T. U. E. L. as a dues-paying organization.

Related to this trade union legalism, to this fear of independent unionism, was a right-wing tendency to surrender the leadership of the opposition in the old unions into the hands of "progressives." Cannon and Lovestone were the great champions of this wrong policy. They objected on principle to the Communists coming forward militantly as the leaders and driving forces in the struggle against the reactionary bureaucrat. Consequently there was often paralysis of our struggle.

Connected with this was the failure to bring forward more aggressively the T. U. E. L. under its own name as the actual leader of the left-wing forces in the unions.

These wrong tendencies were bound up with the wrong united front policy of making joint movements with fake "progressive" leader who pretended to be in opposition. We made many mistakes in this direction, an outstanding example being the alliance with Brennan in the mining industry.

Related to these wrong policies of failure to have the left-wing seize the leadership was the bad tendency of trying to force the corrupt bureaucracy to act (Amalgamation, etc.), instead of cultivating the rank and file workers to take the leadership directly into their own hands in the teeth of the bureaucrats.

Other serious errors made in the trade union work during this period were:

Almost complete neglect of work among the Negroes; prevalence of wrong theories regarding this branch of our work; manifestations of white chauvinism. The work among the youth and women suffered a similar neglect. For all of which we were repeatedly and correctly criticized by the C. I. and R. I. L. U.

Underestimation of the importance of trade union work generally. Failures to mobilize full party forces. Tendencies toward diletantism.

Lack of internationalism in our work; failure to popularize the R. I. L. U. among the American masses.

Sectarianism, tendencies to accept the isolation of the T. U. E. L. and to give the T. U. E. L. a too advanced communist program, dictatorship clauses in T. U. E. L. program. Substitution of Party fractions for T. U. E. L. groups. The "head-on" collision theory.

Failure to utilize the mass struggles in the unions for Party building.

Confusion regarding the role of social reformism. Failure to fight "left" social reformists aggressively, and tendencies to unite with them.

Persistence of wrong labor party theories, leading to the making of united front movements from the top.

Factionalism. This was the period par excellence of the factional struggle, which centered largely around the trade union question and crippled our work disastrously in this field.

Almost total lack of self-criticism in estimating our work. ,

Generally, the so-called period of "prosperity" was one of weakness for our Party in trade union work. Nevertheless we did conduct many serious struggles, as above noted. It was a period of sharpening battle against the social bureaucrats, of development of our militants as strike leaders. The Party was drawn deeper into the trade union work and sank more substantial roots among the masses.

THE PRESENT PERIOD

In the present situation, designated by the Comintern as the third period of post-war capitalism, objective conditions develop rapidly for the making of big and sharp class struggles. This requires radical changes of trade union policy and methods on our part and the ruthless correction of errors, on the basis of a frank self-criticism.

Even as in all other capitalist countries, and as part of the growing world crisis of capitalism, class relations in the United States sharpen constantly. The capitalists, confronted with the growing basic contradiction of capitalism, the growth of the productive forces beyond the limits of the capitalist markets, and the resultant fierce international competitive struggle for markets and accompanying war danger arising therefrom, try to relieve the pressure by still more intensifying the exploitation of the workers, by the most drastic rationalization of industry.

This rationalization of industry is carried out at the expense of the workers. Its fruits for them are more unemployment, less wages, physical exhaustion, terrorism in the shops, great increase in occupational accidents and industrial sickness, etc.

Under this pressure discontent spreads among the masses of workers. They become radicalized. They develop a mood for struggle to protect themselves against the attacks of the bosses. A new spirit of resistance grows among the American working class.

This is part and parcel of the worldwide upsurge of working class revolt now manifesting itself in all capitalist countries.

Evidences of the radicalization of the workers are to be seen on all sides. The South offers the most striking example in the great struggles of the textile workers, the New Orleans strike, etc.

But similar evidences are at hand all through the industries, and are marked by a growing wave of strikes especially among the unorganized and unskilled. The working class, inert so long, is now going gradually over to the offensive.

The capitalists viciously fight to repress this growing struggle of the workers. Especially they try to smash our Party and the new unions. They make increasing use of their two main repressive measures, direct violence and social reformist trickery. The strikes of the present period are highly political. The bosses at once use the powers of the State against them. Troops, injunctions, jailing, etc., are the order of the day. The classical example of this State violence is the railroading of our comrades to jail in Gastonia. And when the State apparatus does not prove convenient enough, the bosses make increasing use of fascist bands. The bitter conflict centering around Gastonia is the symbol of the third period in the United States.

With this open violence the employers constantly make more use of social reformism. When they see that their workers are becoming radicalized and threaten real fight, they call in the A. F. of L. More and more they consciously use the A. F. of L. as a strike-breaking agency, as an auxiliary of their rationalization and war programs. The bureaucrats are quite willing agents. They become ever more fascized. They make ruthless war against the left-wing. They form a united front with the bosses and their State against the workers.

The most dangerous sections of the bureaucracy are the Socialists and the so-called Musteites. Basically in agreement with the whole reactionary line of the A. F. of L., and bitter enemies of the revolutionary trade union movement, they nevertheless, through their radical phrases, can trick masses of workers into the shambles of the A. F. of L. bureaucracy and the bosses, as exemplified by the textile situation in the South, the Boston shoe strike, etc. The Cannonites and Lovestoneites are outposts or feeders to the Musteites. Their main line goes in the same general direction. Their theories of American exceptionalism, which see no radicalization among the workers and no possibilities for struggle, conflict with the whole line of revolutionary unionism.

The big struggles of the workers in 1919-23 produced a crop of so-called "Progressives," the Fitzpatricks, Hillmans, etc., who fol-

lowed the tide of radicalization only to flagrantly betray the workers in the crisis and to buttress up the old bureaucracy. The present great radicalization trend among the workers also develops its "progressives" or Musteite movement. But its reactionary character is more flagrant than that of progressives of 1919-23. It shows far more clearly its true character as an auxiliary of the right bureaucracy to demoralize the masses and to prevent them grouping themselves under the banner of the left wing.

In the present period great tasks devolve upon the Party in the trade union work. The masses of workers seeking a way to fight against the employers can get no assistance from the A. F. of L. They must develop new forms of struggle, new organizations, new methods, new leadership. This whole tendency is crystallized in the Trade Union Unity League. The Party must throw all its forces into the building of the new trade union center and the carrying through of its basic work of organizing the unorganized.

This thrusts upon the Party a maze of urgent tasks; including the active building of shop nuclei and shop papers in the basic industries, the reorganization and strengthening of the whole Party fraction system, energetic building of the T. U. U. L. organizations on a dues-paying basis, development of revolutionary strike strategy and organization methods, the systematic building of minority groups in the old unions, intensive propagation of the burning economic and political demands of the workers, 7-hour day, 5-day week, social insurance, defense of Soviet Union, Gastonia defense, etc., active training of cadres of effective trade union leaders, the persistent bringing forward of the T. U. U. L. on all occasions as the revolutionary union leader of the workers, the development of new forms of struggle to meet the new conditions, such as workers' defense corps, rank and file strike committees, great strengthening of the Negro, youth and women work.

All this work must be done on the basis of a relentless struggle against the right wing in our Party and against the social reformists in the broad labor movement. This can only be accomplished in the spirit of a general self-criticism. As never before the Party must be fully mobilized for the trade union work. Only by such a maximum mustering of our forces can the new trade union center and its component unions really be built and made a leading, fighting force in all the struggles of the workers.

The Party has made many serious errors in trade union work in coming into the present period and in carrying on the work now. These are almost entirely of a right character. We were slow to see the general radicalization of the workers and equally slow to realize the necessity for building the new class struggle unions and

national union center as the means for organizing and leading the awakening workers. These wrong tendencies were especially systematized by Lovetone, Pepper, Wolfe and Gitlow. Only under the harpest pressure of the Comintern and Profintern did the Party begin to realize the true meaning and implications of the third period.

Nor is the Party fully awake to the situation yet. There is among the members still a far-reaching underestimation of the radicalization of the workers. Failure to develop our full force for building the T. U. U. L. Convention was an example of it. Such underestimation failing to see the real opportunities for the Party in the struggle, tends to paralyze the trade union work. It is the basic source of the right danger in the Party and must be ruthlessly eradicated.

A vital weakness in our present trade union work is the tendency to carry over into the new unions conservative practices developed in the reformist organizations regarding policy (arbitration, etc.), structure (local unions instead of hop committees, underestimation of the industrial form, etc.), strike strategy (lack of strike preparations, incorrect economic demands, etc.), organization methods (haphazard union building campaigns, etc.). These craft union hangovers handicapped vastly the building of the revolutionary policy, organization and fighting strategy fundamentally necessary to the new unions and the workers' struggles.

Another serious manifestation of this failure to adopt the new necessary form of struggle is the tendency to make the new unions into mere propaganda bodies rather than real unions fighting directly for the economic and political demands of the workers. This is a clinging to the methods of the movement when its main stress was as a minority opposition in the conservative unions.

Other typical and harmful errors of the present period trade union work are:

Underestimation of the role of social reformism. Theories that the A. F. of L. is dead, that it cannot get leadership in strike movements of the unorganized, etc. Tendencies to set up united front movements with Muste elements, or not to fight against them.

Chvostism: Reliance upon the spontaneous strike actions of the masses, rather than upon systematic preliminary organization building and the struggle initiative of the Party. Akin to this is the failure to assert leadership during strikes of organized and unorganized workers, thus surrendering these workers to the treacherous A. F. of L. bureaucracy and Musteites.

Dilittantism: Toying with strike struggle and organization campaign. Failure to mobilize the full party forces for the fight.

This is so deep-seated in many instances as to constitute a definite underestimation of the importance of trade union work.

Neglect of Negro work. Persistence of white chauvinist tendencies. The Negro trade union work is only beginning.

Abandonment of the old trade unions. Many comrades wrongly conclude that the added stress placed upon the building of the new unions means that the work in the reformist unions shall be given up.

Localization of strike struggles. Failure to spread strikes and organization campaigns broadly when the workers are ripe for action.

Spasmodic and loose organization campaigns in the new unions. Failure to link up these campaigns with the demands of the workers. Chaotic financial systems. Too hasty formation of new unions. Haphazard agitational methods.

Failure to deepen struggles politically. Resistance to the propagation of vital political demands. Neglect of the unemployment issue. Failure to develop concrete programs against capitalist rationalization in specific industries.

Insufficient application of the policy of the united front from the bottom. Tendencies towards sectarianism.

Underestimation of the role of Party. Syndicalistic resistance to Party leadership. Failure to utilize the mass struggles for building the Party.

THE PERSPECTIVE

The perspective is now excellent for the Party in trade union work. Both the objective and subjective factors are favorable. The main consideration is that the Party awake fully to its opportunities and throw all its available forces into the struggle.

The intensification of rationalization, with all its destructive effects upon the workers, is deeply radicalizing the masses and stimulating them to organize and struggle. The intensification of the class struggle, the outstanding characteristic of the present period, will be speeded up by the oncoming economic crisis, signs of which multiply on every hand. This economic crisis will bring with it still more rationalization, unemployment, wage cuts, attacks on the unions, etc., and further radicalization and great struggles of the workers. The big task of our Party is to lead these struggles.

Moreover, in addition to the more favorable objective conditions, the inner Party situation has vastly improved. The right wing in the Party has been dealt a shattering blow — for the first time the Party has been united for struggle against the right danger, the main danger. The long destructive factional struggle has been

finally practically liquidated. For the first time real self-criticism has been established in the Party. All these betterments lay the basis for an effective mobilization of the Party forces for the great mass struggles looming ahead in the near future.

The Southern textile situation, typified by Gastonia, is the sign of the present period. With its intense rationalization, wholesale worsening of working conditions, radicalization of the workers, vicious capitalist repression by the state and fascist bands, militant struggles under the leadership of our Party and the revolutionary National Textile Workers Union, treacherous role of the A. F. of L., etc., it presents a picture of the struggle as we shall see it on a larger and larger scale in the United States in the coming months. The strike of the steel workers in Hamilton, Ontario, *against a fifty per cent wage cut* shows also this trend of events.

The Party must realize the tremendous importance of trade union work in the present period. The first great steps of the discontented masses in the class struggle will be through strikes, through trade union action. The question of organizing the unorganized, of securing leadership over them in their growing struggles; and the development of them politically, is of the most vital importance to our Party. Success in this respect is the broad road to the building of a mass Communist Party in the United States.

During the past ten years the Party has had a rich experience in trade union work. We have made many mistakes, as well as achievements. The Communist International, by its systematic correction of our most stubborn and deep-seated errors, has shown time and again its invaluable services as leader of the world revolution.

Despite such errors as the Party has made in its trade union work, nevertheless it has established definitely its leadership among the fighting elements in the labor movement. Wherever there is a real struggle against the bosses and the social reformsits, our Party leads the battle. It is the backbone of the real resistance of the workers to their exploiters.

Our big job now is to profit by our experiences of the past, especially by the mistakes we have made, on the basis of our general Marxist-Leninist analysis. But this we can do only on the basis of the sharpest struggle against the right danger, especially the dangerous and paralyzing Lovestone theories of American exceptionalism.