

UNITED FRONT TACTICS IN THE TRADE UNIONS

To Defeat the Few, Unite the Many

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By the end of this year over 4.5 million workers will have faced new contract negotiations. Real income has dropped an average of 9% since the last wave of contractual agreements, while 13.6% of white workers and 25.5% of Black workers remain unemployed.

The spokesmen for big business speak in glowing terms of an economic recovery while the labor bureaucrats promise "self-discipline" to the bosses and spread depression-time scare stories to the membership. There is no doubt in any worker's mind today that the crisis is far from over. Rather it is intensifying as the monopolists try to save their empire at the expense of the entire working class and particularly through the increased exploitation of minority and women workers.

Meanwhile, what has happened to the rank and file movement? Where is the conscious expression of the massive anger and disgust spreading within the working class? Why has rank and file organization remained undeveloped, its expression isolated and often spontaneous and short-lived? What is missing from the rank and file movement, preventing it from developing the force necessary to transform our unions into class struggle organizations?

PWOC SUMS UP TRADE UNION WORK

These are the questions on which the PWOC focused as it prepared for its annual organization-wide trade union review. Our work of the past year was analyzed and criticized and we established new guidelines for ourselves for the coming period. And the more we looked at our own mistakes and at the overall situation in the rank and file movement, the more we realized that the root of our errors and of the errors of the broader communist movement was a weak understanding of the tactics of united front work. The leadership of the rank and file movement has not been able to bring together workers of all different political beliefs into a single movement united in its determination to fight for better conditions.

The crucial element missing from the rank and file movement is class conscious leadership—communist leadership. The influence of the communist movement, of class conscious workers, has not grown to meet the needs of the spontaneous rank and file rebellion. Why? Because the communist trend within the workers' movement has been guilty of one central error—sectarianism. It is the sectarianism of the left which has fed the mistrust and anti-communism of the broad masses of workers, separating them from their true leadership and pushing them into the waiting arms of the labor bureaucracy.

How does this sectarianism manifest itself? One of the most serious mistakes of the dogmatist trend within the movement has been its inability to distinguish between middle and right forces in the working class, and between entrenched bureaucrats and honest but conservative officials. Such an error leads them to label, in fact to attack, all but the most foaming-at-the-mouth "revolutionaries" as sell-outs, thereby seriously offending the bulk of sincere trade unionists who are not only allies but will form the backbone of the new rank and file movement.

Secondly, many self-proclaimed "communist" leaders lack any understanding of the relationship between the reform struggle and the revolutionary movement, and are characteristically attracted to adventurist behavior, their proposals often spelling clear disaster to the masses. Finally, the dogmatists have forgotten the fact that the people learn from their experiences. They have failed to root themselves firmly in the working class movement.

UNITE THE MANY

We in the PWOC have been struggling for several years now for the understanding that communists must show to the masses through their *practice* that the science of Marxism-Leninism can in fact guide the way. The present recession not only intensifies the need for leadership in general, but specifically for a leadership which can forge the broadest possible unity among all honest trade unionists to challenge the deathgrip of class collaborationism. Only such a broad unity, organized around the principles of class struggle trade unionism, can begin to turn the tide of reaction which is strangling the working class. That is why we are focusing on the strategy and tactics of the united front.

The concept of the united front is basically a very simple one. It is the conscious coming together of workers from all political persuasions in order to accomplish specific, well-defined, partial goals.

The united front does not demand unity of political belief, nor does it necessarily demand unity of motives. It is a principled agreement to *act together to accomplish a specific goal*—a goal dictated by the urgent needs of the majority of workers. The emphasis is clearly on action because we recognize that the mass of workers learns the lessons of the class struggle from their own experience.

CONDITIONS FOR UNITY

What kind of conditions should we place on our united front formation? What kind of program best speaks to the needs of this particular period? Our conditions will of course change according to the concrete period in

which we work. The only requirement must be that our program must move the struggle forward, must speak to the most pressing needs of the majority of workers.

At present we must attempt to draw the broadest possible forces around a basic program for class struggle unionism, including: 1) the militant defense of our standard of living, the struggle against the employers; 2) the fight for trade union democracy; and 3) an aggressive opposition to all forms of racial, sexual, political and religious discrimination and a conscious approach to working class unity.

Once we have agreed on our immediate goals, how do we know whom to approach, and whom can we expect to join with us? The first distinction we must make is between die-hard bureaucrats and well-meaning but misguided officials. The bureaucrats are those who are cut off completely from the rank and file both by their high salaries and because they are not elected and therefore not directly accountable to the membership. We can't expect these traitors to join with us because if they did they would destroy their own privileged positions.

On the other hand, many local officials are forced into a much closer cooperation with the membership because they are elected. They depend on the support of the rank and file for their jobs. A rank and file challenge will have a dual effect: either mass pressure will force the officials to join our ranks, or if we have developed the issues clearly his or her refusal to join with us will expose the official to the masses as the collaboratorist he or she really is.

Finally, we must learn to analyze the broad rank and file so that we will be clear whom we are addressing ourselves to. What we are trying to do when we build the united front is to unite the left with the center forces in order to develop our greatest strength to fight back against the manufacturers. How do we recognize left and center forces?

LEFT-CENTER ALLIANCE

The left, or progressive workers, are all those who desire to organize their fellow workers because they understand that their strength lies in numbers and unity. They are the self-motivated leadership of the workers' movement, having learned from their experience that we need to develop a systematic approach to our problems. They are enthusiastic about caucus-building and about developing links with workers in other industries, city-wide and nationally. They understand the need to find political solutions to our problems, and though they may not be all that sympathetic to communism, they are open to the development of a class analysis of our situation.

Workers who make up the middle strata, the vast majority, have a much narrower understanding of their own potential or of the tasks ahead. They are issue-oriented and can be drawn into struggle which will benefit their immediate situation. They are not initiators, and have little or no understanding of the class struggle and the need for a consistent, programmatic approach to their

situation. Left to themselves without strong left leadership, the center will tend to fall under the influence of the opportunism and defeatism of the most backward forces and of the sell-out leadership.

There is a very strong tendency both among communists and among the most advanced non-communist workers to become impatient with the center forces and to write them off as hopeless—and when they do this they may as well write off the trade union movement as hopeless. This impatience is aggravated by the fact that the majority of advanced workers are from national minorities, while the consciousness of many white workers has been stunted by racism. So quite often the rank and file left feels isolated from the middle because of racial mistrust and discrimination as well as general political differences. This situation often leads the best fighters to give up in disgust.

Communists have the responsibility to provide the glue which will hold the alliance between the left and the center together. This glue comes in the form of a correct program—one that will simultaneously speak to the needs of the broad rank and file while serving to isolate the labor bureaucrats and careerist or opportunist elements within the rank and file movement. This is the essence of the united front in the trade unions.

DANGER OF TAILISM

The greatest single problem confronting communists who seriously attempt to apply united front tactics is the danger of tailism—sacrificing the real long range needs of the working class in the pursuit of a short term and necessarily superficial unity. If communists do not fight for an advanced program, they end up tailing along behind the center and with it the labor bureaucracy that currently holds sway over the mass of workers.

The pressure to accommodate oneself to politically backward trends in the workers' movement in the interests of maintaining unity is very real. Often it is difficult to distinguish between a correct tactical compromise that furthers unity and a right error which will retard the development of the movement. Abstract formulas are of little use here. Only a concrete analysis of the state of the movement can provide the basis for such an evaluation.

For the ultra-leftists there is no such problem. They hardly need to worry about tailing behind anyone, cut off as they are from the rank and file movement. But while they bask in the glory of their sectarian isolation and purity, we should not allow them the illusion that they are "leading" anyone except themselves.

Finally, we must not give up just because we are not immediately successful or because the leadership continues to insist on red-baiting or radical-baiting. If our program really does speak to the needs of the majority of workers and if our tactics and approach are truly geared to include the majority of workers, then time is on our side, and if we continue to work steadily then our ideas will win.