

worker activists

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE POLITICAL DISCUSSION

The pre-convention discussion has clarified the issues involved in the debate between those comrades supporting the E.C.'s "Steps Toward Building the Party" and the supporters of the counter document, "Build a Worker Leadership, Make the IS a Force in the Class." It is now clear that the key question in dispute is how we can recruit, hold and develop workers and a working class leadership for the I.S.

The opposition position revolves around two closely connected ideas. One, internal to the I.S., the relationship between the full-time leadership and the industrial fractions. The other is external, the relationship between the I.S. and the class, as shown in the orientation to the "worker activists." Both concepts form two aspects of one theory about how we can build the party, a theory which can lead our practice astray.

Everyone in the I.S. agrees that our rank and file work is the key to building the party. More clearly than any other organization, we understand that the revolutionary party will be built out of the day-to-day class struggle for reforms. Our political work in the trade unions, black community, etc. is based on the idea of a united front between the "advanced workers" (those workers who are struggling against one or some aspects of capitalist oppression) and the revolutionaries, who understand that this struggle is only a step in a fight against the whole system. Without this united front policy we could never lead anyone but ourselves. Without this ~~alliance~~ ~~front policy~~ ~~we could never lead anyone but ourselves.~~ Without this alliance we would have no possibility of even influencing those workers who want to fight but are not yet revolutionaries.

While this alliance creates the possibility of influencing and recruiting workers to revolutionary politics, it does not guarantee it. For we are not the only leadership element available. While the number of active ~~rank~~ rank and file leaders (workers with a base) is small, in fact a paper-thin layer in the U.S., it nevertheless exists. Those comrades who support the counter-document correctly point out that our most successful industrial work is based on an alliance between ourselves and just such workers. Given our small size and weak roots in the class, it comes as no surprise that we can move more workers into struggle in collaboration with the established rank and file leadership than we could alone. Over the years of our industrial experience we have indeed learned this lesson.

But we have also learned the weakness of this layer. People who have already gained a following in the working class as it is at present have also learned many of the wrong lessons of class struggle. Behind all the common illusions, and ~~individualistic~~ individualistic styles of leadership that these people have, lies a basic lack of confidence in the ability of workers to assert themselves and control anything. The past 30 years of American history, the thousands of unrecorded defeats, the suppression of any sort of class politics has drummed into people's consciousness the cynicism that workers aren't capable of very much. To the extent that rank and file leaders have a base, it is almost inevitably a conservative pressure. These leaders tend to lead workers who they perceive are more conservative and passive than themselves. Just to survive they have had to lead in a style that perpetuates that passivity. Is it any wonder that these people are chronically looking for short cuts: the courts, out-bureaucrats, etc?

While we must collaborate with these people, they cannot and will not form the raw material of the emerging revolutionary movement. Rather, it will be workers who are new

to the struggle, who are just beginning to sense the potential of workers power, who ~~are~~ are just beginning to sense what workers can do, who will be the stuff the party is built of.

But before we can recruit these fresh forces, they must be broken from the politics of our collaborators. It is natural and less demanding to follow reformist leadership than to be disciplined to a revolutionary line. Workers will join us when we prove through political struggle within the rank and file movement that only our politics can take the class forward. It is this crucial dimension of political struggle at the level of the rank and file movement that is missing from the opposition document. It is missing because it can only get in the way as long as the focus is on the traditional leaders.

This is not to say that every worker who "represents more than themselves" is lost to revolutionary politics. Some of those workers will make it. And their experience as class leaders and their ability to be leaders ~~of~~ of the I.S. will make an important contribution to the development of the I.S. as a workers group. But they will not be recruited in large numbers, or even recruited and held at all, unless the I.S. can move their base. The counter document contends that these workers are the key to proletarianizing our organization. They are not. Not only because of their small numbers but also because of their political background and consequent political timidity.

It is in this context of confusion between building the rank and file movement and building the I.S. that the internal proposals of the counter document must be viewed. No one can be opposed to strengthening the fractions. The danger lies not in their strength but in the weakening of the political life of the organization that is also proposed. The ability of the EC to lead will be deliberately limited by a stepping back from the centralism necessary for an effective organization.

To gear the organization to this layer of "workers with a base" and to make the IS habitable to them would mean many changes in our functioning. The counter document accepts that and proposes transferring responsibilities and political tasks from the central leadership to a number of mini-centers - the fraction leaderships - thus weakening the overall effectiveness of the organization. To have the fractions responsible for the organization and political content of education, WP, meetings, pamphlets, etc. will severely limit ~~and~~ the ability of the EC to collectivise the politics of the organization and apply the lessons of our practise. In fact the natural tendency for the fractions to ~~xx~~ reflect the conservatism of the class is now given organizational legitimacy. The necessary creative tension between the full time revolutionary leadership and the members in industry is liquidated except for ~~xxxx~~ quarterly confrontations at NC meetings. But it is that tension which maintains the overall political health of the group.

There is a growing understanding in the I.S. of the real difficulties we face in worker recruitment and in the transformation of our group into a factor in the American working class. Comrades are looking for answers to many difficult problems, problems that no one has all the answers to. The focus on recruiting "worker activists" is supposed to be the solution, or at least the first big step towards a solution. Its appeal ~~xxx~~ lies in its relative simplicity and its

built-in explanation of why establishing a solid working class base is too difficult for us and must therefore be left to the "worker activists." It is an appealing idea, but close examination reveals it to be an appealing illusion. There is no quick and easy way to build a revolutionary party.

The transformation of the U.S. will only be completed when there are large numbers of active, new, worker members. A handful of "worker activists" will not accomplish that change and it is irresponsible of the supporters of the counter document to pretend that they will.

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