

# DISCUSSION BULLETIN

No. 11

January, 1953

## CONTENTS

### PERSPECTIVES AND TACTICS IN THE UNIONS

Report to New York Union Fractions  
December 28, 1952

By Farrell Dobbs

Published by the

SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY  
116 University Place  
New York 3, N.Y.

15¢

## PERSPECTIVES AND TACTICS IN THE UNIONS

(Report to New York Union Fractions December 28, 1952)

By Farrell Dobbs

Comrade Chairman and Comrades:

I welcome this opportunity to present a report on our national fractions and our perspectives and tactics in the unions in the next period. It gives me a chance to present a few thoughts I hope you will find of value in dealing with your problems in the New York work. I am sure that the general discussion to follow will provide food for thought for all of us.

Our union fractions must work today in an adverse political climate that seriously limits the scope and tempo of our activities. The unfavorable conditions of the past five years have caused us some reverses ...

There has been a general retreat from union executive posts back into the ranks. We have suffered some losses of worker-members who had not been sufficiently assimilated to withstand the adverse pressures. Some comrades who had gone into union work as colonizers have since withdrawn ...

The over-all picture is one of relative decline in our union strength across the last period, but it isn't an entirely negative picture by any means. We have recruited some unionists into the party. We still have important elements in most areas where we have worked in the past, and we have managed to open up a few new situations.

We must support these precious union elements in every way we can. Continuous efforts should be made to reinforce them through careful attention to new colonizations and above all through recruitment from the union ranks.

This brings us to the vital questions of orientation in union work; our short-range and long-range perspectives; and the basic tactical problems involved.

The world today is witnessing gigantic class battles in which the capitalist system is being challenged by the colonial slaves of the colored races and by the workers of Western Europe and England, with at least a third of the world population already outside of the capitalist orbit. We are witnessing on the world arena a most decisive confirmation of Marxism -- a confirmation in action through class struggles.

Yet it is one of the ironies of history that -- when the Marxist concept of the class struggle as the motive force of social progress is so forcefully confirmed elsewhere in the world -- here in America we must combat the lie that our country is exempt from the laws of class struggle; that our society is a classless society; when in reality the class polarization here is probably the greatest it is anywhere in the world.

If propaganda -- important as it is for us -- were our sole means to combat this lie, we would have little chance to make headway against the vast propaganda machine of the capitalists. But we have powerful aid in the class struggle itself which constantly breaks through the capitalist myth that ours is a classless society. It breaks through in various forms of workers' struggle against their employers, whether in steel mills or in sweat shops.

To use this powerful aid of the class struggle we must clearly understand the component elements engaging in struggle, the social pressures upon these elements, and the tasks of the socialists at the present stage of American political developments.

In our union work we must deal with many contradictions that arise from our efforts to inject a class struggle program into a predominantly class collaborationist movement. This appears elementary and obvious, but it is precisely this seemingly obvious elementary fact that is sometimes lost sight of when dealing with intricate tactical problems in the unions.

The workers are indoctrinated with class collaborationist ideas from childhood. They are organized into unions under a strongly entrenched bureaucracy that is consciously class-collaborationist, consciously hostile to class struggle policies, fearful of militancy in the ranks, and anti-democratic in its internal policies.

The workers are further weakened by a process of differentiation of their material interests. A given body of workers in a factory will receive varying rates of pay, due to different skills, periods of service, etc. They, nevertheless, are impelled toward solidarity against the employer to maintain and improve their wage rates, unequal though these rates may be.

The employer attacks this solidarity in numerous ways, including the picking off of talented and militant workers through offers of jobs in supervision. The union bureaucrats apply the same technique in the selection of individuals to draw into their apparatus.

A worker may be getting ten dollars a week from the union officials for some completely legitimate reason. Yet, if his fellow workers are in a mood to conduct a strike over some issue and the union bureaucracy is against it, that particular worker must think not only of the risks of the strike itself. He must also consider whether he wants to risk the loss of that ten dollars and the prospect of rising in the union bureaucracy.

His material interests have become differentiated from those of his fellow workers. In his case the elemental solidarity has been broken. A rank and file leader is becoming corrupted into an opportunist misleader.

This process of differentiation operates on up through the various layers of the official apparatus; the greater the prospect of personal reward, the greater the rupture of an individual's solidarity with the rank and file workers. It takes a class-conscious person to withstand this temptation of personal gain at the expense of his fellow workers.

Some of you are veterans of military service. You have seen this same process operate, although in a somewhat different way, in the army. I refer to the case of the non-coms who serve as a buffer between the officer caste and the ranks. "Right guys" and "wrong guys" can become non-coms. However, the tendency is for the "right guy" to have his stripes ripped off, while the "wrong guy" tends to rise to a higher rating. If those of you who have had military service reflect on your experience from this point of view, you should find that you have already acquired important knowledge that will help you understand the process of differentiation that takes place in the union movement.

We enter the class collaborationist union movement with our class struggle program at the point of production where the pressure of class antagonisms is the greatest. These antagonisms generate class struggle manifestations in the form of grievances, protest actions, strikes. Such manifestations occur at various intervals and in varying degrees of intensity.

However, these outbursts of militancy among the workers do not yet reflect full class consciousness on their part. We must remember that militancy without a high degree of class consciousness can be only relative and transitory. It is limited in its potential. It cannot withstand indefinitely the combined pressure of the employers, the union officials, and the government.

Our tactics must, therefore, be attuned to the limitations as well as the possibilities inherent in outbreaks of worker militancy. Our tactics must also accord with the general political climate within which these manifestations appear. In general, if we try to crowd beyond these outer-limits in our tactics by counting on aid from a section of the union officialdom to help sustain militancy in the ranks, we are getting onto very dangerous ground. There are, however, some limited exceptions to this general rule.

The lower ranks of the union officialdom have their own contradictions. They are closest to the workers on the job. They feel the pressures of the class antagonisms affecting the workers. They are under greater compulsion to respond than the higher officials. They even transmit some of these pressures to the top bureaucracy.

But these lower ranks of the officialdom are also subject to counter-pressure from the higher officials. They convey class collaborationist policies into the factories. They often act as policemen against the militant workers.

The lower-rank officials are constantly buffeted by these opposing pressures. They are more conservative or less conservative in the present period according to whether the pressure is greater at the moment from the top officialdom or from the union ranks. When a stronger pressure on the lower officials is coming from the ranks, this temporary circumstance offers certain tactical possibilities for us, but always with definite limitations in both scope and time.

Even the top officials have contradictions that sometimes favor us. These case-hardened bureaucrats aspire to name, fame, fortune, and class peace. Still they must render a minimum service to the workers or they would have no reason whatsoever for being.

When sharp class antagonisms thrust the workers into motion, or the capitalists are heavily counter-attacking the unions, these bureaucrats usually must do a little fighting. When the union ranks are relatively passive, on the other hand, the top officials try to suppress any militancy in the ranks and they often seek to victimize the most aggressive rank and file fighters.

Here again there are sometimes certain tactical openings for us, provided we accurately sense the changing moods of the workers, correctly gauge changes in the political climate, know how to estimate the transitory role of the officials when they are forced to fight, and promptly readjust our tactics as circumstances become altered.

Tactical thinking is sometimes confused by the mistaken notion that sheer personal ability will enable a person to make himself so useful in practical union work that he can penetrate into the official apparatus without becoming involved in unprincipled official policies.

This problem is complicated by pressure from the workers. They want to push honest, talented people into union posts, "so we will have at least one good guy in there to speak for us." But all these considerations miss the main point.

Union bureaucrats place a certain value on talent, of course, but in all really important matters they also want subservience, which stands as the polar opposite of freely exercised talent. Whenever a bureaucrat must choose between the two, he can be expected to decide in favor of subservience.

This puts a class conscious worker in an untenable position. It tends to unravel much of the work he has done. He must start again at the bottom -- a marked man.

Talent is very useful, as are adroit tactical maneuvers. But nobody can cheat the laws of the class struggle through talent, maneuvers, or any other gimmick. To win leadership in fact, as well as in name, and to apply class struggle policies in union tactics, we must have strength in the ranks.

This strength must derive primarily from effective union fractions, around whom the best militants can be polarized to constitute a broader left wing capable of drawing large masses into motion when class struggle moods prevail. That is why the keystone of our union work must be the recruitment of unionists into the party and why we must pay attention to further colonizations to help along this general process.

If we are to follow a correct tactical line in the unions that will facilitate the recruitment of workers into the party and enable us to help along the mass radicalization, we must always keep in

mind the general political climate. We must carefully analyze the political possibilities and limitations of the present period and evaluate the likely course of future political transitions.

We know, as Marxists, that the fundamental cause of the present international conflict is the growing world-wide revolt against capitalist exploitation that is leading inevitably towards world socialism. We know that American imperialism is the only capitalist force with any real power to oppose this revolt. It will be capable of dealing savage blows against the world revolution until the American workers take the revolutionary road and throw their decisive weight behind the struggle for socialism.

We know that the workers of America will be driven into struggle against the capitalist system by the mounting pressures of the counter-revolutionary war policy that are building inevitably, but at an unpredictable tempo, toward profound social crisis in this country. We believe that the mass radicalization, when it comes, will probably arrive with explosive force. We expect its initial manifestations to appear in the unions.

We find this evaluation partially confirmed by the popular hatred of the Korean war -- a sullen American army at the front, grumbling here at home, strikes in time of war. And Korea is only a preliminary fire fight. The worst is yet to come.

We must remember, however, that the present impact of the capitalist war policy is softened by the high rate of employment, a considerable degree of artificial prosperity and limited wage concessions. The occasional outbursts of militancy that now occur reflect only the first waves of resentment against the present cushioned shock of the war policy. They are not yet signs of class conscious opposition to capitalist war. These militant outbursts, therefore, can be only relative and transitory.

Even these limited flareups of militancy are further restricted by the government witch-hunt and by pressure from the union bureaucracy which supports the war policy and is doing its own private witch hunting.

These circumstances warn us to watch our step in the unions. Yet we can't avoid risk entirely, because the element of risk is present to a degree in all motion, and there is some forward motion we can maintain right now.

We can recruit unionists into the party.

It is true that recruits are harder to get today than they are when the masses are in motion. But recruits who come to us when the workers are engaged in struggle often come as a result of agreement on tactical moves in the unions, or out of admiration for the fighting qualities of comrades. This initial attraction is sometimes not very political in nature. It takes quite a period to assimilate these recruits and we can easily lose them over secondary matters. Worker recruits are harder to get today, but those we do attract come to us for more political reasons. Their assimilation is thus helped along and we run somewhat less risk of losing them.

Unfavorable as the present union atmosphere is for us, we will find workers receptive to our ideas, even if we turn up only one at a time. Our job is to seek out these receptive minds, present our ideas to them, first in terms of the immediate tasks confronting the workers, thereby seeking an opening for a gradual unfoldment of our full socialist perspective.

Foremost among the immediate tasks of the workers is the formation of a labor party. We can educate, propagandize, and even agitate around this issue.

The 1952 elections provide excellent ammunition. The union officials went all-out for Stevenson. It appears that a majority of the union ranks voted for him. Yet labor suffered a stinging defeat and reaction gained a new ascendancy. This occurred because labor had no class line. Consequently Eisenhower was able through his demagogy to capture most of the dissatisfied elements among the unorganized workers and the middle classes.

We can expect the union bureaucrats to remain Stevenson Democrats. But there should be a somewhat freer discussion atmosphere in the unions. There appears to be some room for post mortems on the election defeat, discussion of what labor should do next, and criticism of the Eisenhower administration. We should use every opening of this general nature to hammer home the labor party argument.

The Militant should be helpful in this work. You can't always take a copy of The Militant into the factory. However, you can cut out clippings that will be of special interest to the workers and bring the clipping into the plant. Our resourceful comrades will find many simple but effective ways to handle this problem. Just start the best way you can and try to wind up with a sub.

To carry on union work most effectively our unionists should also look to their own political education. This is a particularly good period for study to fortify yourself with a better grasp of the Marxist fundamentals in revolutionary theory and program, in class struggle strategy and tactics.

Another sphere of activity that offers limited possibilities for us today is the ceaseless tug-of-war over grievances, provided we pick practical issues, set realistic aims and do not crowd our luck. The most realistic grievances to fight today are those that touch the general interest of an important body of workers, are attuned to the mood of the workers and are in accord with the actual relation of forces. In fighting these grievances it is safest to assume that your opponent will use his maximum strength against you and will have the necessary tactical skill to do so. Prepare your fight and limit your aims accordingly. Don't gamble on an easy victory in anything, especially today.

Resistance to the witch hunt also provides a limited vehicle for our union work, as has been demonstrated by the Michigan comrades in their fight against the Trucks Law. They carefully assessed the different currents in the unions and worked out a general approach best calculated to win support at least in the lower levels of the union officialdom. They got a response that far exceeded the first

expectations. As a result we are making a strong fight against the Trucks Law. Our standing in the unions is strengthened. We have new sources of contact and fields of work, not only in the unions but also in the general community. Also significant is the fact that this is the first major political action by Michigan labor and liberal forces since Reuther came to power in the auto union that he did not initiate and has not so far dared openly attack.

There is room today to fight against discrimination and for up-grading in the plants. The colored workers have become an important segment of the union ranks. They are above-average in militancy. That is the main reason why most union officials give lip service to the demands of the colored workers for equality, whether they believe in it or not. They can, therefore, be compelled to respond in a certain degree to pressure for a fight against discrimination and for up-grading. Here in New York there is a huge body of Negro workers and about 300,000 Puerto Rican workers. It seems worthwhile to give this factor special attention.

One more point on immediate tactics. This is a poor time for us to be seeking executive posts in the unions. The pressure of the top bureaucracy outweighs too heavily the limited counter-pressure from the ranks. There would generally be too great a demand for you to support unprincipled official policies and too little room for you to play a constructive role. This creates a serious danger of being either compromised or victimized in union executive posts at the present time. It is sometimes possible to take steward posts or similar functions, depending on the concrete circumstances in each case. Even on this question the best rule to follow right now is -- if in doubt, don't.

We must work harder and be more careful of our conduct to make gains in the present adverse political climate than is the case when the masses are in motion. However, the central thought to keep in mind is that we can make gains. We can't do anything spectacular, but the things we can accomplish will be well worth the effort.

As the transitional struggles of the next period unfold, we will find new opportunities for work in the unions. The capitalist war policies demand greater economic pressures on the workers and new restrictions on the unions. To impose these pressures and restrictions the capitalists now have the Eisenhower administration, backed up by the Republican-Dixiecrat coalition in Congress. None of these elements are hampered in any serious respect by dependence on labor for votes.

Eisenhower appears to be taking a soft line at the start, but that is mainly because he needs some time to prepare his international orientation and arrange a bit of sugar-coating for the bitter pills he will prescribe for labor. The capitalists will give him some leeway on the time schedule, but they want their pound of flesh from labor and not all of them are patient about it.

The recent convention of the National Association of Manufacturers was a triumphal celebration of rank and file capitalists who feel they have wounded labor and are eager to close in for the kill. The pressure from the ranks was so great on the top NAM officials



that they had to make speeches warning the capitalist militants to act "statesmanlike." These same NAM leaders helped cook up the strategy that led to the withdrawal of the industry members from the Wage Stabilization Board. They also predicted a fight in 1953 over industry-wide bargaining.

The big capitalists appear to have decided they want no more truck with government wage boards. They want to impose their own brand of wage control. They can be expected to stiffen their resistance to union demands, present counter-demands of their own, call on the government to back them up by new repressive laws and even by some good old-fashioned strike breaking.

The union bureaucracy, on the other hand, will not mobilize the workers as a class to meet this almost-naked class assault by the capitalists. Instead they will seek allies among liberal capitalists and plead for friendly government intervention. They will try to find some working relationship with the Eisenhower administration. They will make some threats and run a few bluffs, but none of this will work.

Concessions to the workers will diminish and then become transformed into their opposite -- serious slashes in living standards. This is demanded by the war policy. Attacks on the unions will become stiffer. Outbursts of workers' struggle will grow sharper and tend to become more prolonged. All acts of repression will meet broader mass resistance. We will find powerful new allies against the witch hunters.

An extension of the war front could temporarily put a brake on this upsurge of worker militancy through appeals for national unity and drastic acts of repression, but such a retarding action could lead only to a more explosive outburst later on.

The transitional sharpening of the class antagonisms under the pressures of the war policy will facilitate the building of the revolutionary vanguard as it deepens militancy in the union ranks. It will increase the workers' pressure on the lower strata of the union officialdom and even force the top bureaucrats into struggle on occasion. We must watch this process closely and participate in the actions, but we must also be careful not to mistake mere skirmishes during the first stage for the major battles that will be longer in coming.

Ahead of us lies a contradictory process of struggle. It will have starts and stops, ups and downs. Acts of capitalist repression can become more severe, but we must remember that a decaying power can seem the boldest and be the most vicious precisely at the moment when it is in its last death throws. We will be so much the better fortified against acts of repression, the deeper we have penetrated into the union ranks, and the larger the class conscious vanguard we can mobilize.

Whatever the actual course of events may be, the pressure of the coming social crisis is bound to increase and the class antagonisms will grow sharper. The union officials will either alter their

policies or find themselves coming into sharper collisions with a fighting rank and file.

Our job is to prepare now in every way we can for the coming crisis; by education, propaganda, agitation, recruitment; by realistic union activities in the present situation as a prelude to our work in the developing struggle of the next period; by carefully readjusting our tactics from time to time as dictated by the march of events.

This preparation will enable us to intervene with our class struggle program at each new stage where the class antagonisms generated by capitalism collide with the treacherous policies of class collaboration.

# # #