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LETTER FROM R. TEARSE

London, England
June 2, 1947

Farrell Dobbs,
Industrial Organiser
SWP

Dear Comrade Dobbs,

I would like to discuss with you, as Industrial Organiser, an article contained in the SWP "Party Builder" (Internal Bulletin) Vol. IV, No. 2, signed by Comrade J. Lyons.

Describing a union election campaign in which members of the Chicago Local of the SWP participated, Comrade Lyons points out that their purpose in this election was not to "engage in an educational campaign in which we could advance some of our programmatic ideas," but "we had decided that our objective was to actually win the posts." Later in the article this aim is repeated: "Our objective was to win the posts; therefore, we were extremely careful not to advance points which would frighten and drive away any considerable section of the workers. Had we been in for educational purposes, our objective would have been to mobilise the advanced sections of the workers. In this case, we would probably have advanced many far reaching programmatic points at the expense of possibly losing the support of the more backward elements. Since our objective was to win, we could not afford this risk; consequently, we advanced those points which would mobilise the widest possible sections of workers." (My emphasis)

I think that such ideas necessitate a posing of the question, "why do we fight for union positions?" The only reason is that, apart from the propaganda value of such elections, in such positions we would be more able to put forward our programme. It would provide a rostrum, an important rostrum, from which we could more easily reach the ears of the workers.

Such a rostrum must have a solid basis. It would be false to assume that the rostrum could be secured by methods other than that of subordinating votes to programme and then, once having attained the position, begin the putting forward of our programme. The resulting confusion among the workers who elected us would tend to cut the basis away from the comrade in the position, and render the position worthless. Union positions can only have meaning for us when they have been secured and held on the basis of our programme, where the votes have been consciously cast in support of our ideas.

From these statements I have quoted from Comrade Lyons' article, and a reading of the article as a whole, it appears to me, despite the references he makes to the use of programme, that our comrades engaged in a vote-catching campaign. They "could not afford the risk" of advancing "many far reaching programmatic points at the expense of possibly losing the support of the more backward elements."

Elsewhere in the article, Comrade Lyons amplifies on the methods adopted by the comrades. He states: "Here are some examples of how the Unity machine actually operated. If an operator encountered a high-paid, conservative American-born worker he would pick out the point in the programme dealing with improved insurance and then proceed with a long discourse on insurance benefits. If he encountered a militant, he discussed the points on making the company live up to the contract provisions. If he met a Negro worker he centered his discussion on the point of abolishing discrimination. With a worker who is known to be insistent in his demands for improved safety equipment, he discussed the programme's safety plank. Thus, each individual worker was given the impression that the point discussed by the operator was the main point in the programme, and in most instances, that individual was well satisfied with the programme." (Lyons' emphasis).

Now, in discussing these methods I appreciate that we do not advance our full programme on every occasion that we conduct union elections or carry out similar work. At various times it is necessary to lay stress on particular aspects of our programme, and confine our campaign to those aspects. For example, in Britain at the present time, any election address issued by an RCP member who is standing as candidate for a union post would have as its central points our programmatic demands on Nationalisation (and the problems flowing therefrom -- workers' control, no compensation, etc.), on Wages (rising scale, etc.) and Hours (sliding scale, etc.). Other ideas may be included in the address, but those I have listed would constitute the core of the campaign.

In the course of the campaign, discussions would, to be sure, take place around this or that point, and the nature of such discussions would inevitably vary according to the level of the worker involved, his particular interests etc. What is important, however, is that the programmatic points contained in the address would be stressed as a unified whole, to all the workers involved. Votes would be subsidiary to programme. Even at the expense of losing votes from more backward elements there would be no attempt to give to different sections of the workers, separately, impressions that our programme had several different emphases. But it seems that such were the methods adopted by our Chicago comrades.

In line with our purpose, as I previously outlined it, in contesting elections, our movement has always taken an attitude that we would rather lose an election, where every vote obtained was solidly for our programme, than win on the basis of votes cast for us as a result of an opportunistic adjustment of the programme to suit the level of consciousness of the respective voters.

Presumably, if the conservative worker, or the worker who is concerned with safety equipment, is generally opposed to a militant working class policy, so long as he had successfully been led to the belief that the Unity programme coincided with his particular grievance in order that his vote could be obtained, everything was satisfactory? What results would obtain when these workers got together and discussed the full programme they imagined they had been supporting? The militant worker would probably point out that the

victory of the Unity Ticket would now mean that a real struggle was to take place against the boss. The conservative worker could point out that he is opposed to such a struggle, and certainly didn't vote for the Unity Ticket on such a basis -- he received the impression from the operators that their main concern was improved insurance; that was the basis of his vote.

I would suggest that the results would tend to discredit our comrades who participated in such methods and consequently discredit Trotskyism.

My impressions are that our comrades did not function as Trotskyists in this election campaign. It is thus not at all surprising that we read the statement: "The total effect of these seemingly unimportant considerations was that of giving the impression that our side was the official leadership, while the Stalinists appeared to be irresponsible malcontents who were trying to muscle their way into office."

These vote-catching methods are precisely the methods of the union officials, which we have always striven to combat and expose before the working class. Our only answer to these methods has always been to stand firm on our programme, measuring our progress only by the extent to which the working class has assimilated and supported that programme. Any positions or votes gained by any other methods can only have a basis of sand, and rebound to our discredit. Surely we are in agreement on this proposition, which is based on the criterion that votes are subordinate to programme?

Once the comrades had set as their objective the catching of votes, they appear to have been led to the most unfortunate methods. To give but one example: in describing the slander campaign of the Stalinists, their opponents in this election, Comrade Lyons elaborates on the methods used to combat these traditional methods of Stalinism: "Besides being armed with mere answers, the operators were also armed with tales (and true ones) about the leading Stalinists"... "The result was that the Stalinists were so busy tracking down and attempting to stop the spreading tales about themselves that they had little time to be spreading rumors about our people."

The fact that our comrades were armed with "true" tales does not alter the position that they allowed themselves to be reduced to the level of Stalinist methods. If this had any impression on the workers involved, it could only be as a result of their backwardness. I would suggest that to serious workers it would only appear as a nauseating slanging match, in which the Trotskyists appeared to be no better in their methods than the Stalinists, and which has nothing in common with our primary task of raising the level of the working class.

I would appreciate having your opinions on this article of Comrade Lyons, and your comments on the ideas raised in this letter. I think that this can lead to a fruitful exchange of ideas between us.

Comradely greetings,

R. Tearse, Industrial Organiser, RCP

P.S. I would be pleased if you would enclose copies of the programmatic statements issued during the election campaign, with your reply,

THE TEARSE LETTER -- SYMPTOM OF AN AILMENT

By J. Lyons

Some time ago, a group of comrades in Chicago participated in a union election contest. In that contest a number of tactics were employed which proved to be of great value in winning support for our candidates and program. Together with those comrades, the writer of this article contributed an article to the Party Builder, an Internal Bulletin of the Socialist Workers Party, in order that comrades in other districts might benefit from the Chicago experience. This is a customary procedure in the Socialist Workers Party motivated by the desire to speed the process of training the party workers for work in the mass organizations.

It goes without saying that constructive criticism of such articles is always welcomed in our party. There is always room for improvement in our methods and tactics, and such criticism goes a long way toward avoiding mistakes and raising the level of understanding among our comrades. Good Trotskyists, unlike petty-bourgeois diletantes, do not resent criticism, but instead, devote serious attention to it and strive to utilize it for the improvement of our work.

From London there recently came a letter addressed to Farrell Dobbs of the Socialist Workers Party, sent by Comrade Roy Tearse, Industrial Organizer of the Revolutionary Communist Party of Great Britain. Comrade Tearse raises a number of severe criticisms of the above mentioned article by J. Lyons. He requests a "fruitful exchange of ideas" between himself and Farrell Dobbs. Had Comrade Tearse's letter limited itself to mere criticisms of the tactics used in the above mentioned election campaign, there would be no objection to confining the exchange of ideas to the two industrial leaders. Unfortunately, however, Comrade Tearse's letter goes far beyond the realm of mere criticism: it is in reality a direct attack upon the whole Trotskyist concept of work in the mass unions. For that reason, his remarks must become the property of the entire membership of the two respective parties, particularly of their proletarian sections. It is necessary to unveil his attack and ask the workers to judge which outlook is Trotskyist and which is not.

Since Comrade Tearse accompanied his attack with a series of specific criticisms of the conduct of the Chicago comrades, it is no more than proper that the author of the article in question undertake to answer those criticisms. This article will deal with the criticisms, with the conclusions drawn, and with what those conclusions represent.

The gist of Comrade Tearse's letter is that the Chicago comrades engaged in a "vote catching campaign," an "opportunistic adjustment of the programme," and that they "did not function as Trotskyists in this election campaign." To Trotskyists, these are grave and serious charges which are not to be taken light-mindedly.

Comrade Tearse begins with a quotation from the Lyons article: "Our objective was to win the posts; therefore, we were extremely careful not to advance points which would frighten and drive away any considerable section of the workers. Had we been in for educational purposes, our objective would have been to mobilize the advanced sections of the workers. In this case, we would probably have advanced many far reaching programmatic points at the expense of possibly losing the support of the more backward elements. Since our objective was to win, we could not afford this risk; consequently, we advanced those points which would mobilize the widest possible section of workers." (Tearse's emphasis)

It is indeed surprising that the Industrial Organizer of a Trotskyist party, presumably a leading authority on trade union problems, should stumble over such a simple observation. The essence of the statement is that it is not necessary nor advisable to present the same, stereotyped, trade union platform in every case. It is necessary always to keep one eye on the objective. The statement clearly implies that when we have no chance to win leadership we confine ourselves to an educational campaign. Our only aim then is to popularize our program among the workers, whether the mass of workers is interested or not. On the other hand, if objective conditions and our own strength permit us to fight for leadership of the union, we must take into consideration the workers as they really are, not as we would wish them to be. The reaction of the workers to our propaganda is decisive in determining whether or not our objective is to be achieved. If we have no intentions of respecting that reaction, then we have no business setting ourselves the objective of winning the leadership!

What did the Chicago comrades do in their specific situation? They advanced as many programmatic points as they possibly could under the circumstances, and refrained from advancing those which to many workers would tend to appear as abstract and which would consequently distract attention from the central points which the workers were willing to support! Points were advanced which were timely, which coincided with the workers immediate problems, and which appeared realistic to the bulk of the workers.

To this procedure Comrade Tearse objects vigorously in spite of the fact that in the same letter he goes on to say, "I appreciate that we do not advance our full programme on every occasion that we conduct union elections..." (Tearse's emphasis). We fail to see his appreciation when he says, "...in contesting elections, our movement has always taken an attitude that we would rather lose an election, where every vote obtained was solidly for our programme, than win on the basis of votes cast for us as a result of an opportunistic adjustment of the programme to suit the level of consciousness of the respective voters" (Tearse's emphasis). Of course, that has always been our attitude! But the question is, did the Chicago comrades engage in an "opportunistic adjustment" of program, or did they engage in a tactical adjustment? On this score Tearse appears to be non-committal: yet, it is clear to everyone that by implication he accuses us of the former. If this were not so, then what would be the purpose of even raising this question in his letter?

A program that is adjusted opportunistically is a program that is contradictory to the party program -- in short, it is a program that is falsified! If Comrade Tearse thinks that this was done, then he should openly say so.

The argument that Trotskyists in the mass movements do not adjust their programs to meet the level of consciousness of the respective voters is a purely one-sided academic observation. In the trade unions the Trotskyists are always faced with peculiarities, and they are compelled to meet them accordingly. "...a communist in a trade union is not at all obliged to say all that the party says," wrote Comrade Trotsky in 1933. This is the axiom which the Chicago comrades followed. They did not falsify or contradict their program: They merely confined themselves to advancing those programmatic points which were timely, and which would best serve their aim of winning the election.

This did not mean that they reduced their program to a point where it appeared little different from that of their opponents. On the contrary, it proved to be the most far-reaching program ever advanced before this group of workers. Among other things, it was the first program ever to include a point defending the right of workers to harbor whatever political views they desired. This was a very far-reaching point, when one considers the intense red-baiting campaign of American imperialism currently being supported by the trade union officialdom. Even more important is the fact that the central point of the program, the point to which the greatest attention was devoted, was the sliding scale of wages. Even the backward elements were ready to support this point: therefore, we saw no reason why we should have advanced other programmatic points which they would not so readily understand, and which would only serve to distract their attention. In the United States, at the time of the election, a campaign around the sliding scale of wages represented a gigantic step forward for the workers. The level of all of them was raised considerably in the Chicago campaign. It was the first time that a campaign of this kind had been conducted anywhere in the country on so large a scale. To Comrade Tearse this is nothing more than an "Opportunistic adjustment" of program. To any serious Trotskyist, it represents a very sound tactical application of program in a strictly Trotskyist fashion.

Methods and Tactics in the Struggle for Leadership

Comrade Tearse justifies his charges of "Opportunistic adjustment" by severely criticising some of the tactics employed by the Chicago comrades. "My impressions are", he says, "that our comrades did not function as Trotskyists in this election campaign." Among other things, he bases his criticism upon the following quotation from the Lyons article:

"Here are some examples of how the Unity machine operated. If an operator encountered a high-paid, conservative American born worker he would pick out the point in the program dealing with improved insurance and then proceed with a long discourse on insurance benefits. If he encountered a militant, he discussed the points on making the company live up to the contract provisions. If he met a

Negro worker, he centered his discussion on the point of abolishing discrimination. With a worker who is known to be insistent in his demands for improved safety equipment, he discussed the program's safety plank. Thus, each individual worker was given the impression that the point discussed by the operator was the main point in the program, and in most instances, that individual was well satisfied with the program."

In reviewing the above section of the article, the writer noticed that it was not made sufficiently clear that the activities of the Unity operators were supplemental to the general propoganda campaign of the Unity caucus. However, this admission would not deter Comrade Tearse in the least as can be seen from the conclusions he draws later.

"Presumably", says Comrade Tearse, "if the conservative worker, or the worker who is concerned with safety equipment, is generally opposed to a militant working class policy, so long as he had successfully been led to the belief that the Unity programme coincided with his particular grievance in order that his vote could be obtained, everything was satisfactory? What results would obtain when these workers got together and discussed the full programme they imagined they had been supporting? The militant worker would probably point out that the victory of the Unity Ticket would now mean that a real struggle was to take place against the boss. The conservative worker could point out that he is opposed to such a struggle, and certainly didn't vote for the Unity Ticket on such a basis -- he received the impression from the operators that their main concern was improved insurance: that was the basis of his vote." (Tearse's emphasis)

He continues, "I would suggest that the results would tend to discredit our comrades who participated in such methods and consequently discredit Trotskyism." With whom would Trotskyism be discredited? Comrade Tearse does not say. Perhaps the conservative worker would be a bit peeved at having been deprived of the opportunity to vote against a militant program. But what is to be said about the militant worker? Would he feel that an injustice was done to that conservative? Anyone who has an understanding of the character of militant workers would hardly admit this possibility.

The militant worker knows the conservative element well. He would quickly recall that this is the same conservative who, a few years earlier, joined the union only after the militants had set up picket lines to prevent non-union men from going to work until they joined the union. He would well realize that this fellow is not in the least interested in the welfare of the union or the working class, but that he is interested only in what privileges he as an individual can acquire, even if it be at the expense of the union men. The militant would no doubt smile approvingly at the way the vote of this conservative was put to good use by helping elect into office a militant leadership. Far from being discredited, Trotskyism would receive a lift in prestige with that militant worker; for he better than anyone else, recognizes the need for a device which can prevent such conservatives from repeatedly retarding the work of the real union builders by voting against militant leadership. The

militant works hard, devotes himself tirelessly to the cause, while the sum total of the conservative's contributions to union activity is to cast an anti-militant vote on election day. The conservative's complaints of being swindled into voting a militant ticket would find little sympathy among the union militants.

The above is not at all intended as an admission that the Chicago comrades engaged in a campaign of swindle in order to win conservative votes. It is only intended to bring to light the abstract character of Comrade Tearse's estimate of the workers' mentality. In reality, the above mentioned activity was only a supplement to the central activity of the comrades; that is, the activity which successfully brought the entire program before every worker in the plant. This aspect of the campaign will be discussed later; for at this point, our interest is attracted by the criticism of our methods of operating.

Comrade Tearse protests that our program should be stressed as a "unified whole to all the workers involved." Here again we see the academic concept at work. Comrade Tearse refuses to look upon the working class and see it as it really is. He imagines a working class which measures up to ideal standards, and he sees no weaknesses and no consequent difficulties for the Trotskyists in the unions.

Our critic is apparently unaware of the existence of a section of the working class which does not conform to his hypothetical standards. These workers are of the type that have very narrow interests in their own minds. They look upon life only from the standpoint of an individual, rather than from the standpoint of a member of a group or an economic class. These workers are little impressed by programs, unless they can see in them a point which might prove beneficial to them as individuals -- the balance of the program notwithstanding. There are such people in the working class; and if Comrade Tearse doubts their real existence, let him inquire about it among the workers in the RCP.

The role that this section of workers plays in our struggle for leadership varies with the relative strength of our opponents. The more the strength of our opponents approximates our own, the more decisive is the importance of influencing these workers. This is precisely the problem which faced the Chicago comrades. According to the best estimates, the forces supporting our opponents and us were about evenly divided. Unhappily, the decisive weight rested in the hands of this small group of backward, individualistic, narrow minded workers. It was imperative not only that we attract with our program the advanced workers, but that we also influence the votes of the backward type mentioned above. Not to have done this would in reality permit the most backward section of workers to decide the leadership of the union. In order to avoid such a tragic possibility, the Unity operators devised the tactic of demonstrating to each of these workers that they had a particular stake in the victory of the Unity Ticket.

But Comrade Tearse objects. He demands that the comrades should have presented these workers with an ultimatum that they either support our program "as a unified whole" or go to the devil.

Had our comrades acted in such a fashion, four years of successful struggle against the Stalinist leadership would have been thrown to the winds.

Needless to say, since the Chicago comrades were fighting a Stalinist opposition, they encountered the traditional Stalinist combat method, the slanderous whispering campaign. A special device was developed to effectively check the spread of the Stalinist rumor-poison. A counter campaign was organized by the Unity operators in which every one of the Stalinist lies was answered by word of mouth. This alone was not enough: something more was added. It was described in the Lyons article as follows:

"Besides being armed with mere answers, the operators were also armed with tales (and true ones) about the leading Stalinists"... "The result was that the Stalinists were so busy tracking down and attempting to stop spreading tales about themselves that they had little time to be spreading rumors about our people."

Let us note carefully Comrade Tearse's complaints about this procedure of the Chicago comrades. "The fact that our comrades were armed with 'true' tales does not alter the position that they allowed themselves to be reduced to the level of Stalinist methods." What profound logic is here displayed! For the Stalinists to spread lies, and for the Trotskyists to spread the truth is one and the same for Comrade Tearse. Since when, it must be asked, has it been the Stalinist method to spread true "tales" about their enemies? Perhaps Comrade Tearse knows of an instance. As yet, we have heard of none in the Western Hemisphere.

In general, Trotskyism is not opposed to the Stalinists or anyone else spreading tales about, if they adhere to true tales. We welcome free publicity at any time. Unfortunately, our enemies, in particular the Stalinists, are not so obliging. It is precisely because their method is one of spreading lies and slander that we condemn it so vigorously.

On this phase of the campaign, the Chicago comrades demonstrated remarkable ingenuity. They took the form of their enemy's method, and changed the content. Rather than expend valuable time and energy in the agonizing business of forever explaining to the workers that they are not "Fascists," "Stoolpigeons," and "enemies of the working class," as the Stalinists had whispered, they resorted to an offensive attack. In addition to answering the lies, the Unity operators spread the story about the conduct of individual Stalinist leaders as union officials in the past.

Here is but one example of those shocking "tales" which the Unity operators carried to the workers: A former Stalinist president of the union found himself in difficulties toward the end of the war. He was caught between the support of the No-Strike policy and the Stalinist pseudo left turn of 1945. During his term of office a strike broke out in the plant. The Stalinist leader, whom the workers looked upon as a fighter, was duty bound as a Stalinist to order them back to work: yet, to do this would mean to completely discredit himself as an aspiring leader. As a result, to use an

American colloquialism, he "took a powder", that is, he left town without leaving any word as to his whereabouts. He returned only after the strike had ended; whereupon he was forced to resign from his post.

This "tale" was spread by word of mouth throughout the entire plant. Workers who had heard the slanders against our people were quick to question the authority of their Stalinist informers once they had learned of the conduct of the above mentioned leader. To be sure, this is but one of the "tales" taken from the well-stocked Unity repertoire. Upon request, we shall be happy to make available many more for Comrade Tearse.

The most interesting aspect of the use of this tactic is that it was designed not merely to clear the Trotskyist name, but mainly to prevent the Stalinists from shifting the battleground of the fight. The tactic effectively checked the Stalinist whispering campaign, and forced them back to the main battleground from which they were attempting to escape -- the fight over program.

Comrade Tearse is not impressed. He continues: "If this had any impression on the workers involved, it could only be as a result of their backwardness. I would suggest that to serious workers it would only appear as a nauseating slanging match, in which the Trotskyists appeared to be no better in their methods than the Stalinists, and which has nothing in common with our primary task of raising the level of the working class."

In condemning the methods of the Chicago comrades, Comrade Tearse in passing reveals his own method. The Lyons article was written in the past tense, indicating thereby that the election was over. It would seem no more than right that before venturing his suggestion Comrade Tearse would inquire as to how many workers voted in the election. This would be a good indication of how the serious workers felt. Without even considering this simple expedient, Comrade Tearse ventures a suggestion -- from London! Let us see how his suggestion squares with reality.

The particular union in which our comrades were involved covers a membership of approximately 9500 workers. In all nine previous general elections in the history of this union, the total vote cast fell far short of the 3000 mark. In the election following the Unity campaign -- this "nauseating slanging match" -- 4900 votes were cast, the majority of them for the Unity Ticket. We could hardly be convinced that the serious workers stood aside while 4900 backward workers voted. On the contrary, such an unprecedented election turnout was possible only because it was mobilized by these very same serious workers. It was not only the highest vote cast in the history of this local union, it was more than double the vote cast in any local union of comparable or greater size throughout the whole union of nearly a million members. If this is a mere "slanging match," then it would be well for Trotskyists to begin agitation for more and better "slanging matches."

Besides charging the Chicago comrades with resorting to Stalinist methods, Comrade Tearse accuses them of also using the

"Vote-catching" methods of the union officials. He reinforces this charge with another quotation from the Lyons article:

"The total effect of these seemingly unimportant considerations was that of giving the impression that our side was the official leadership, while the Stalinists appeared to be irresponsible malcontents who were trying to muscle their way into office."

Here again, we cannot avoid colliding, not with the methods employed by the Chicago comrades, but rather with the method employed by Comrade Tearse in his letter. The above quotation has been torn completely out of context in order to give an entirely different meaning from that intended in the article. It is necessary only to quote the entire paragraph from which the quotation was extracted in order to expose the distortion:

"Throughout the whole campaign there was one item which clearly distinguished us from our enemies. Everything that we did, had the appearance of systematic organization. Nothing was haphazard, nothing was left to chance. Every detail was covered: every action was organized. All literature was printed because we have learned that mimeographed work, no matter how well done, lacks the authority of printed work. The American worker is impressed by what he calls "class." Printed material alongside of mimeographed work is to him the difference between a sparkling, stream-lined automobile and a Model T. In the same sense, the radio spot broadcasts and the newspaper ad appeared to be "big time stuff," "classy," etc. This lent much authority to our propaganda, and in itself, reflected well-organized and business-like campaign direction. The total effect of these seemingly unimportant considerations was that of giving the impression that our side was the official leadership, while the Stalinists appeared to be irresponsible malcontents who were trying to muscle their way into office. In reality, the Stalinists had held office for four years, but they lost this advantage by failing to grasp the importance of these idiosyncracies of the American workers."

Any experienced unionist can testify that in periods of relative tranquility in the labor movement, the chances of an election victory favor the incumbent officials. Taking cognizance of this important fact, the Chicago comrades designed a tactic which deprived their opponents of this advantage. Comrade Tearse arbitrarily tore the quotation out of context in order to give it an entirely different meaning. He then proceeds to attack the distorted impression.

The comrades designed the tactic for two purposes. First, it served to deprive their opponents of an incidental advantage which may have defeated us -- program and all. Second, it served to demonstrate the business-like character in which our comrades work. But these are the methods of the union officials, objects Comrade Tearse, thereby implying that for that reason alone, such methods should not be used.

How well we know that these are the methods of the union officials. Unlike Comrade Tearse, the Chicago comrades did not

turn their backs upon these methods. They learned how to use them and how to use them better than the officials. For this they are condemned by Comrade Tearse. He little realizes that in effect he is asking us to march against our enemies with stones while they fire upon us with cannons.

What is wrong with using the radio to advance our program and candidates in an election? What is wrong with purchasing an advertisement in the bourgeois press which is so widely read by the workers? What is wrong with using a printing press rather than a mimeograph if we find this to be more attractive to the workers? Comrade Tearse frowns because these methods are used by the officials. He overlooks a very important difference: the officials use these methods to propagate their reformist programs, while Trotskyists use them to propagate our own program. A profound difference, but one before which Comrade Tearse chooses to close his eyes.

A Trotskyist who refuses to learn anything from the methods of the union officials is doomed as far as influence in the mass movement is concerned. We must beware of such a one-sided view of the role of the labor leadership. The art of organizing workers is not inherited at birth by any man -- not even a Trotskyist. It is a skill which is developed through many years of actual experience in the mass movement. The labor union officials, in spite of their treacherous historical role, have what is almost a monopoly of knowledge in this field. A Trotskyist, interested as he should be in the art of organizing workers must strive to learn all that he can from the union officials. In reality, he will learn how to use the form of their methods, and change the content, that is, he will use those methods to advance the Trotskyist program. It must always be remembered that the best program in the world is absolutely useless, unless one is successful in bringing it before the workers.

The "Conscious" Votes for Our Program

The above described methods used by the Chicago comrades are to be condemned, says Comrade Tearse, because they were "vote-catching" methods. He demands that in an election "every vote obtained" must be cast "solidly for our programme." Moreover, he continues, "Union positions can only have a meaning for us when they have been secured and held on the basis of our programme, where the votes have been consciously cast in support of our ideas." (My emphasis--J.L.)

Once again, the seemingly profound wisdom of our critic reveals itself as nothing more than a purely abstract, literary, one-sided view of the trade union struggles. To Comrade Tearse, program is apparently nothing more than a succession of words printed on a sheet of paper. It never occurs to him that program is given flesh and blood, is personified, in the conduct of individual Trotskyists in the unions. Workers insist upon being materialists. They judge a candidate for union office, not only by his printed election platform, but also by his conduct in the past. What is the conduct of a Trotskyist candidate if not the party program in action? Trotskyists and Trotskyism are inseparable. They are one and the same in the eyes of the advanced workers. These workers

have no difficulty in grasping this simple truth over which the Industrial Organizer of the RCP stumbles so clumsily.

How many times has it been repeated in our movement that the best way to win support in a trade union is to demonstrate in action that we are the best fighters in the interests of the working class? To Comrade Tearse, to be the best fighter means to present the best program -- on a sheet of paper -- in the best fashion. But life is not so simple. Important as it is, program alone is not sufficient. To win leadership the Trotskyists must also be the most militant fighters on a specific picket line, during a specific strike. This would win for them the support (and votes) of thousands of workers who "consciously" know nothing about our program. All that they know is that the comrades were good fighters on the picket line, and that is enough. According to Comrade Tearse, those comrades would be obliged to repudiate such support, since such votes would not be cast "consciously" for our program and our ideas.

Comrade Trotsky advised us to strive in the unions to show the workers that we are "capable and serious class fighters who can be trusted and relied upon." Our support and influence in the unions will grow to the extent that we are able to carry out that advice. In order to fulfill the above requirements, the comrades in the unions must act in accordance with the ideas they acquire through an understanding of the party program. Once they convince the workers that they are capable and serious fighters the workers will vote for our comrades. In effect these workers will be voting for the Trotskyist program and ideas -- quite unconsciously! It is as simple as that.

The Method of Comrade Tearse

The letter of Comrade Tearse is interesting enough from the standpoint of the quotations he takes from the disputed article. It is even more interesting from the standpoint of what he did not quote. Our critic sought to describe to the comrades, not what really happened in the Chicago election campaign, but what he wished had happened. In order to do this, he constructed his letter in such a fashion as to minimize the importance given to the question of program by the Chicago comrades. He skips lightly over this aspect of the article, describing it as mere "reference" to "programme" by Comrade Lyons. He quotes the article at length on the matter of campaign methods, leaving out the fact that all methods were designed to advance the program in one fashion or another. Below are given some of the "references" to "programme" which appeared so unimportant to Comrade Tearse. In each, the central ideas are underlined.

"Our appraisal of the Stalinist program led us to the conclusion that their weakest point was the lack of a realistic program on the wage-price question. The only thing they could offer was an appeal for an 'effective' OPA. We decided, therefore, to build our program around the sliding scale of wages. Our strategy was to trap the Stalinists in a polemic on this question, and then to expose their weakness on the all-important wage issue."

"It was of the utmost importance to us that the campaign follow a dignified programmatic line in order to avoid a number of pitfalls. We could not gain anything by carrying on a fight on minor organizational questions which inevitably degenerate into old-fashioned mud-slinging and gossip. . . In addition, it would give us an opportunity to tell the story of the failure of OPA to hold down prices, and counterpose the sliding scale of wages to the Stalinist line. This was the strategy which was planned at the beginning of the campaign, and which carried us through the fight victoriously.

"When a leaflet was issued on our wage program, the caucus operators -- the foot troops of the campaign -- were instructed to spread the ideas embodied in the leaflet by word of mouth immediately after the leaflet's appearance. The result was remarkable. The whole plant was discussing the sliding scale of wages before the day had passed."

"The wage leaflet, like the program, was also presented with a well-organized plant-gate distribution. This time a somewhat larger group of men were involved in the distribution, and a bit of slogan-shouting was added for effect."

"...They (i.e. the Stalinists) returned to catch the afternoon shift and got the surprise of their lives. The Unity operators were already there in full force with a second edition of the Unity program, whose popularity by this time was making the Stalinist leaders very nervous."

"That afternoon the Unity operators came to the gates for the last demonstration. This time they brought a two-page newspaper carrying a lead article exposing the failure of OPA to hold down prices, the silence of the Stalinists on the wage issue, and an explanation of the sliding scale of wages.

"The first appearance of our program was not taken seriously by the Stalinists, but as the operators began to pound the sliding scale of wages, interest grew among the workers. Several days later a special leaflet on this point alone appeared, and the operators increased their speed. In the face of no program on wages on the part of the Stalinists, the sliding scale of wages monopolized the discussions among the workers in the plant. All gossip, all organizational questions, all petty issues fell by the wayside as the Unity wage program roared by... Nevertheless, the almost impossible was accomplished. The Stalinists were pulled out of their fox-holes and dragged out into the open in a fight on program, where they proved themselves unable to fight."

The "fight on Program": that is the theme which runs throughout the entire article. The program was built "around the sliding scale of wages": "all petty issues fell by the wayside": "The sliding scale of wages monopolized the discussions among the workers in the plant": "The whole plant was discussing the sliding scale of wages": these are the mere "references" to program of which Comrade Tearnse speaks. He refuses to believe that these things really happened. He insists upon seeing the Chicago comrades, not

as they are, but as he wishes to see them. His whole method is one of taking the incidental and the supplemental, omitting the fundamental, and thereby giving a distorted picture of the work of the Chicago comrades. He little realizes what serious weaknesses of his own he reveals by this method.

The Value of Union Positions

Comrade Tearse expounds his own views on the matter of union elections after first posing the question: "Why do we fight for union positions?" He then proceeds to give an answer:

"The only reason is that, apart from the propaganda value of such elections, in such positions we would be able to put forward our programme. It would provide a rostrum, an important rostrum, from which we could more easily reach the ears of the workers."

Well spoken, Comrade Tearse! What has been said is almost true, but there is one serious fault: namely, not enough has been said. Once again our critic betrays a purely academic view of the trade unions. To him, the trade unions appear as a huge debating society in which the officials talk, and the workers listen. All that is apparently necessary is for us to talk faster and better than our opponents, and victory is assured. How simple would be the tasks of Trotskyism in the unions if they were limited to such a narrow plane.

It is not the writer's intent to in any way belittle the importance of union positions as a rostrum for reaching the ears of the workers. This is an important aspect of the matter, but it is only one aspect. It is necessary to reach not only the ears of the workers, but also their eyes and their hearts.

To Trotskyism, the trade unions represent the largest single arena of struggle for ideological influence over the masses. The problem has thus been described in our resolutions. It must be remembered that an arena is a place where a physical struggle takes place before the eyes of many spectators. One seldom goes to an arena to listen to a debate. Tearse apparently sees the struggle only as a verbal struggle. It follows then, that in union positions, our comrades would have more opportunities to talk. This is all that is really valuable as far as Comrade Tearse is concerned. Apparently, Comrade Tearse has not yet learned to think in terms of struggle -- that is other than verbal struggle.

There are any number of reasons why Trotskyists enter elections for union posts. Where our forces are weak and we have no intention or desire of actually taking hold of positions immediately, we engage in campaigns for the purpose of advertising our party program among the workers. The aim of such activity is to attract the most advanced workers in the hope of bringing them closer to us and recruiting them into the party. In this case it is a matter of scrutinizing the field for party material.

In other instances, the holding of union positions is dictated by the need of consolidating and extending gains already made.

Thus it is not at all impossible that Trotskyists can be forced into a contest in order to be able to conduct organizing drives upon unorganized sections of the working class, when the incumbent leaders fail to do so. This would be done in order to protect the organized workers from the danger of being singled out for attack by the class enemy.

In the case of the Chicago comrades, an entirely different aspect of the problem came into play. Events themselves dictated the necessity of participating in the election. For four years our comrades had been hammering away at the Stalinist leadership. Toward the end of the war, many workers turned away from the Stalinists and began to look toward our comrades for leadership. On the other hand, the Stalinists were using the administrative apparatus against us in such a fashion as to weaken our influence, isolate us from the workers, and build the Stalinist machine. In order to consummate the activity of the previous four years, the comrades found it necessary to make a bid for leadership, or face the prospect of losing the tremendous support that had been gained. The situation was not ideal for participation in the contest, but the comrades had no other choice in the matter. They accepted the challenge, and set for themselves the aim of actually winning the posts.

This is a bit different from Comrade Tearse's observation that we fight for union posts merely because they afford us a rostrum from which we can better reach the ears of the workers. In the case of the Chicago comrades, the election represented the crucial point in their long battle with the Stalinist leadership. The problem was posed: either win the positions, or suffer serious setbacks in prestige and influence among the workers, to say nothing of possible Stalinist frame-ups. The ears of the workers had already been reached, and they were listening. Not only were they listening; they were demanding that our comrades take the leadership. The fight had reached a stage where it was necessary to wrest the apparatus out of the Stalinist hands.

Perhaps the most important reason why we seek positions in the unions is the fact that union positions are the best vehicle with which a Trotskyist machine can be built in the mass movement. This may be condemned as a method of the officials, but such a charge does not in the least remove the importance or the necessity of building this apparatus. It is not enough to have the correct program for the workers, it is not enough to have the most able people in the leadership of the unions: all this will have real meaning and real importance only when it stands upon a human organization of Trotskyists who stand ready at all times to defend and extend the program and support the Trotskyist leaders. This organization, this human machine, is the staff of noncommissioned officers of the Trotskyist army. They are the troop leaders, the fighters, who in action translate our program from words and ideas into living reality. They are the ones who demonstrate before the eyes of the workers that Trotskyist leadership is the only correct leadership for the working class.

This again is different from Comrade Tearse's concept of merely reaching the ears of the workers from a rostrum. Our concept

views not only Trotskyist trade union leaders who are able to speak brilliantly from a rostrum, but who are equally able to direct the Trotskyist non-commissioned officers in battle. It is these "non-coms" who lead the workers to the picket lines and show them how effective picket lines are set up. They are also the ones who take the grievances before the agents of the class enemy and demonstrate that Trotskyists are best able to defend the case of the working class. These same fighters show the workers, not in words, but in action how to best build and defend the unions. Wherever there is a battle, these Trotskyists are in the forefront. At all times they keep their eyes open for possible party material, never losing sight of the fact that not the least important part of their work is recruiting new members for the party. They do all of this as a united, disciplined human machine; the total result of their activity being a greater party prestige in the eyes of the workers, a strengthening of our forces in the movement, and the building of our party membership.

The building of the party membership is greatly facilitated once we win the formal leadership of a union. In addition to providing us with a rostrum, formal leadership opens many avenues for extending our influence among the workers. With formal leadership in our hands, it becomes easier to advance to the forefront capable Trotskyists who had previously been held back by the administrative trickery of our opponents. It becomes easier to acquire finances and time for organizing work. It provides for opportunities of withdrawing comrades from the factories in order that they might enjoy free time to learn the art of organizing the proletariat. These are but some of the many factors in determining our interest in union positions. All of them are excluded by the narrow, academic concept of union positions being valuable only because they provide us with a rostrum.

The Resistance to the Mass Turn

The article with which Comrade Tearse has taken issue, was written at the request of the leadership of the Socialist Workers Party. This was in conformity with our attempts to lay more emphasis on the technical side of work in the mass movement in order to facilitate our transition from a propaganda circle to a mass working class party. The period of discussion and debate over program in the SWP which lasted for so many years, can only be of value if we are now able to use the education of that period for the purpose of ending our existence as a propaganda circle and beginning the next stage of our existence as a proletarian party. Our comrades are now learning the art of translating the party's ideas into the language of the workers.

This is the task which also stands before all of our co-thinkers in the Old World. Trotskyism cannot exist forever as a discussion circle. It must now take the step of carrying the program to the workers, not only in leaflets, pamphlets, and books, but in the flesh and blood of Trotskyists working in the mass movement. To do this it is necessary that our workers acquire a knowledge of the technical side of work in the mass movement. It is necessary above all to acquire a realistic appreciation of the

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