

Draft Memorandum on Trade Union Policy

1. During an extended period of political adversity since the 1944-46 labor upsurge it has been necessary for trade union comrades to follow a general policy of caution. With the union ranks more or less quiescent, attempts to challenge the ruling bureaucracy would have laid the challengers open to victimization. Efforts to play a leading role within the framework of official union policies would have led to violations of class struggle principles, thereby compromising the comrades and the party. Militants could do little more than hang on in the unions, carry out educational work among receptive listeners and prepare for a future upturn in objective conditions.

2. Today the internal union situation is changing. Inflationary pressures are generating rank and file militancy in defense of living standards. Wage demands are stiffening, as are pressures for effective escalator clauses. Ascending waves of strike action are spreading throughout the union movement. Contract settlements recommended by official union negotiators are frequently rejected by the rank and file. Workers not only do not tend to be squeamish about strike action involving war production, they also show considerable readiness to resist government strike-breaking -- characteristics that reflect the impact, especially on younger workers, of the intensifying black struggle and student upsurge. These broadening membership pressures for effective use of the union power are beginning to alter the relationship of forces between militants in the ranks and the bureaucrats at the top.

3. Faced with the declining ability of union bureaucrats to keep a tight check rein on the workers, the capitalist government is preparing tougher police controls over the labor movement. Measures are being designed for more extensive suppression of the right to strike. Plans are afoot to outlaw industry-wide and coalition bargaining, as well as to block union mergers. New forms of direct government control over internal union affairs are being cooked up. These hostile acts against dissatisfied workers can only antagonize them against the government.

4. The sharpening labor-capital conflict puts the union bureaucrats in a bind. They find it increasingly difficult to conciliate the capitalist overlords, as they seek to do, and at the same time maintain support within labor's ranks. Bureaucratic paring down of official union demands throws them increasingly out of harmony with the workers' actual needs. Weak-kneed compromising of these inadequate official demands in contract settlements aggravates the problem. Proposals for "voluntary" arbitration of contract terms, made in an effort to ward off new antilabor laws, flatly contravene growing membership pressures for use of the strike weapon. Similarly, the imposition of no-strike clauses during the life of a contract deepens frustration and anger in the union ranks over company violations of the terms. The felony is compounded when union bureaucrats help the capitalists break "unauthorized" walkouts.

5. As the crisis of union leadership worsens new internal formations are developing in opposition to the entrenched bureaucrats. Usually these oppositions tend to be relatively unstable, lacking in experience, limited in programmatic outlook and not firmly led. Yet it is significant that they are beginning to appear and that the trend is spreading throughout the unions generally. Also meaningful is the fact that younger workers, who comprise a large and growing proportion of the trade union ranks, play a big part in the opposition movements. They lend dynamism to these formations, whereas the bureaucrats must rely primarily on support from older and more conservative workers. Added impulses toward militant action derive from increasing unionization of various categories of public workers who find themselves in an especially difficult economic position. Their fight against the capitalist government, which to them is the direct employer, will help both to intensify the struggle against strikebreaking laws and to teach all workers political lessons about the antilabor role of the whole governing apparatus.

6. Bureaucratic efforts to stem the rise of organized oppositions in the unions have focused on moves toward palace overturns in top circles. Examples range from Abel's defeat of McDonald in a contest for the steel union presidency to Reuther's present challenge of Meany for central leadership of the labor movement. Starting from pretended response to rank and file criticisms, diverse ruses are used to arouse hope that necessary changes in union policy can be entrusted to self-reform measures within the bureaucracy. At the outset many workers will be susceptible to this maneuver. It will take time and experience for them to see through the trickery and come to the realization that all union bureaucrats are misleaders who can't be trusted.

7. Although experiencing a decline in leadership authority, the bureaucrats remain well entrenched in the unions. In general they can still withstand head-on attacks from internal oppositions and even take reprisals against impetuous militants who get too far out on a limb. These circumstances lend importance to the use of flanking tactics by oppositions at the present stage of developments.

8. The central objective of the opposition program should be clearly defined as defense of working class interests in the face of employer and government attacks. Key demands should be aimed straight at the class enemy, being careful to avoid any implication that the primary objective is to oust incumbent union officials. To the extent that rank and file support can then be mobilized around fighting union policies, the bureaucrats will be put on the spot. They must either respond to the will of the membership or stand exposed as unreliable. Instead of the bureaucrats being in a position to victimize militants, it will become increasingly clear to the union ranks that a change in leadership is needed.

9. Tactical advantage can be derived from rifts in the bureaucratic structure. Disputes among top officials open the way to

press for critical examination of union policy in the ranks. Using this opening militants can go beyond discussion of narrow disagreements within the officialdom and introduce a class struggle approach to the solution of labor's problems. In the process lower-echelon bureaucrats, who are most directly subject to rank and file pressures, can be pushed a certain distance toward opposition to policies laid down from on high. This weakening of the bureaucratic monolith will help, to a degree, in advancing the fight for rank and file control over union affairs.

10. A certain opening is provided by the Labor Leadership Assembly For Peace. Although run by bureaucrats who keep within the framework of the capitalist dispute over tactics in Vietnam, it at least challenges Meany's attempt to impose a monolithic pro-war line on the labor movement. This rift at the top helps open the way for debate on the war issue in the union ranks. Intervention toward that end in the LLAFP development, including circulation of Labor Voice For Peace and related material, requires careful avoidance of pitfalls for militants created by the official policies imposed by the bureaucrats who run it. The work must be done in a way that leaves no implication of support to LLAFP's negotiation line on Vietnam or to bureaucratic use of the formation as an electioneering instrument for capitalist politicians. In view of this official line the LLAFP does not in itself constitute an instrument around which efforts can be centered to build left wing groupings. It has potentialities for stimulating membership participation in the dispute over union policy on the war. An opportunity is thus afforded to advance arguments in favor of immediate U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. As the debate gains momentum steps can then be taken, according to specific union situations, to press for official adoption of a firm antiwar position.

11. Measures can be taken by the antiwar movement to assist development of allied forces in the unions. Approaches to responsive union sectors through literature distributions, offers to provide speakers at union affairs, solicitation of reciprocal labor representation at general antiwar meetings and actions, etc., would give added momentum to antiwar sentiments that are becoming increasingly widespread in the ranks. In the changing union climate right wingers will find it hard to block such efforts by the antiwar movement. It is noteworthy that even among union bureaucrats at the founding session of the LLAFP a speech about harm done the unions through internal witch hunting was received rather sympathetically. Comparable sentiments are bound to become even more pronounced among rank and file unionists.

12. Rising black power trends in the Afro-American movement imply parallel developments of black caucuses in the unions. Essentially the step involves self-organization of black workers, determination of their own program and selection of their own leaders. White militants have the duty to support black workers in exercising these rights and to extend fraternal collaboration to black formations in a manner that will promote black-white unity in the unions and on the job. Specific Afro-American de-

mands for full equality should be incorporated into the general left wing program. Efforts to combat racist attitudes among white workers should be coupled with a fight to guarantee black workers full democratic rights, including meaningful representation in the official union leadership. Promotion of black-white cooperation among militants inside the unions should be accompanied by efforts to develop union support to the struggles of the black communities. Through the resulting impulses that will come from radicalizing black workers the union movement as a whole can be further impelled toward anticapitalist actions.

13. Spontaneous oppositional formations now appearing in the unions represent workers at varying levels of political understanding and class outlook. Even those becoming more advanced in their thinking tend to lag in class political consciousness. Patience and understanding will be required to help them progress step by step toward the necessary class perspectives. Our broad union program can't be forced upon them in one stroke. Its acceptance can be developed only through a series of struggles over particular issues and through lessons learned in these experiences. A transitional phase will be required before oppositions heading consciously toward a showdown with class collaborationist misleaders can be firmly knitted around the necessary anticapitalist outlook.

14. While introducing specific points of policy in stages as required by the given concrete situation, we should be clear in our minds about the overall immediate program around which we strive to build left wing forces. This includes rank and file control over union affairs; escalator clauses in all contracts, formulated to keep wages fully abreast of rising prices; reduction of the work week with no cut in pay; full compensation for jobless workers, including youth unable to find a place in the labor force; defense of the unconditional right to strike; complete union independence from government control; equal rights for all workers in the unions and on the job; full union support to the Afro-American struggle in every sphere; immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam; a complete break with capitalist politics and formation of an independent labor party based on the unions.

15. Advocacy of an independent labor party should be central to our propaganda work in the unions. Concrete experiences in economic struggles should be used to explain why union action alone, even though vitally important, is not adequate for defense of working class interests. Every hostile action by the government, every broken promise by the capitalist politicians who run it, should be used to expose its antilabor role. Examples should be cited of the many allies who would support a working class challenge of capitalist rule. Along these lines we should argue persistently for a basic turn in union policy toward formation of a labor party and a fight to take power in labor's name.

16. Although objective conditions are improving, our prospects in the trade unions at present remain modest. The key task is still one of propaganda and education aimed toward formation of

left wing forces around a class struggle program. Since the workers are not yet ready for a general showdown with the bureaucrats, it is necessary to steer clear of premature power struggles in the unions. Critical support to an oppositional ticket may be in order here and there as a step toward loosening up bureaucratic control over the ranks. Concerning our comrades participating in power caucuses and running for union posts, the question must always be put: Will it help or will it cut across building left wing forces around a class struggle program? On this point delicate matters of timing may sometimes arise. In such cases appropriate tactics should be worked out in consultation with the party. In addition, wherever comrades are involved in trade union situations, the party should be kept informed of significant developments as an aid to the assessment of general trade union trends.

Approved by Political Committee
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