

## THE OBJECTIVE BASIS OF OUR TO RECRUIT

by Blake Lear

FAILURE

The disparity between the large circulation of Labor Action, its popularity with workers, and the extremely modest number of new members gained therefore has raised what was bound to be raised throughout the party in any event -- the question of recruiting. The reaction which the writer has heard, which range all the way from the statement that it is impossible to recruit at all up to Lund's oil stock prospectus guaranteeing us a thousand members by January if we will only water down our standards a little bit, have one thing in common -- a failure to understand the present mood of the working class, especially in its attitude toward us, and a failure to understand the character of our paper.

The simple fact is that in the main, but not exclusively, our failure to recruit broadly is due to the political retardation of the working class today, and not to any fundamentally wrong course, politically or organizationally, on our part. No amount of tactical agility will enable us to hurdle this obstacle decisively in the present period. For that we must patiently await a deepening of the class consciousness of the masses. At the same time, of course, we must persistently be driving the wedges of our program home along the line of cleavage between the reformist and the revolutionary aspects of the worker's thought process.

That we are on the eve of significant changes in the structure of working-class thinking should be apparent to all. Not to understand this and to resort to some magical organizational open-sesame will be to disorient the party in the face of the opportunities ahead.

To say all this is not to suggest that our recruiting both in regard to method and numbers realizes what is possible from the present situation. It does not, and proposals in regard to it will be developed later in these pages. The main impediment to our recruiting, let us repeat, lies in the political backwardness of the working class, especially pronounced today, in the face of the tasks that confront it. The corollary to this is the necessity of bridling the schemes of some of the "get-rich-quick-Wallingfords" of the organization.

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At what stage of consciousness has the working class, and especially its most advanced sections, arrived today? This can be most clearly viewed by studying the reaction of the working class to Labor Action. The popularity of Labor Action is an indubitable fact, verified daily by the experiences of every comrade in the shops. It is in no sense a Cannonite pipe-dream conjured up to lull the membership. A thousand and one anecdotes from the shops attest to that. The obvious inference to bedrawn is that the advanced sections of the working class, at least, are in agreement with our ideas. And since our ideas are socialist ones, it would seem that a great number of workers who read our paper should be revolutionary socialists or the next thing to it. Why, then, aren't they within the ranks of the Workers Party? It would seem self-evident that we are defective organizationally somewhere.

Unfortunately, this analysis, which seems to be that of most who set out to attack the problem of recruiting, does not exhaust the question. The king-pin of this analysis is the identification of sympathy for our paper as socialist sympathy. This is fundamentally incorrect. It is not yet socialist sympathy.

In reality there are two Labor Actions. Over one the worker places a large, firm plus sign. Over the other he places a question-mark--an optimistic, friendly question mark, if you will, but a question mark. The first Labor Action, and given the paper as it is today, the preponderant section of the paper, is what one might characterize as reformist. Under this heading some stories dealing with war profits, corporation scandals, trade union politics and a section of the political analysis. This, in general, is the section of the paper which workers endorse, and endorse enthusiastically. It is the section of the paper they are most interested in, it forms the burden of their conversation when they discuss the material in Labor Action, it becomes their vade mecum in their union struggles. But this material does not step beyond the confines of militant trade unionism. It is, taken by itself, reformist in character.

The second LABOR ACTION is comprised of that material which is presented from a revolutionary socialist point of view. Today, such material occupies a minor portion of the paper.\* Generally speaking, it is less read than the previously-mentioned material. Where one may speak of the workers' acceptance of the "reformist" section as being categorical, his acceptance of the "revolutionary" section is conditional. His attitude is not one of antipathy. Far from it; we are being given a respectful hearing. It is expressed by statements such as: "What you say sounds pretty good. But I don't know; I'm not sure. I'll wait and see." The reasons for this attitude should be plain enough: the general political backwardness of the United States working class; the current general well-being (after all, nobody is on WPA); the Roosevelt hypnosis; the hope that things will not be allowed to go on "in the old way" after this war; the hope that the war will end soon, etc.

This tacitly or explicitly expressed duality of attitude toward LABOR ACTION characterizes a heavy majority of the current readers of the paper. That this state of suspension is daily resolving in our favor and that the tempo will be greatly accelerated in the immediate future, no one need doubt. But at the moment, the existence of this duality, grounded on economic and political facts, signifies that the average reader does not feel the necessity for a socialist solution to his current problems.

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\*Too minor a portion, it might be remarked in passing. When a worker, and by no means the most militant worker in the rubber shop says to me, "They say this Labor Action is a Trotskyite paper, but I don't see anything so radical about it," it is a sign not only of the popularity of LABOR ACTION and a general concurrence in its ideas, but also of an insufficient differentiation of LABOR ACTION as a revolutionary socialist paper.

No one should think that the failure to resolve this duality flows chiefly from a faulty recruiting technique. That might account for a small part. But no one who has worked over thoroughly a list of LABOR ACTION subscribers, as we have among some of the most militant rubber workers in the URWA, can fail to recognize the existence of the situation we have just described.

The main cause, we insist, but not the exclusive one, of our failure to recruit lies in the political retardation of the working class.

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The main cause but not the exclusive one....Generally speaking, our recruiting bears the marks of improvisation rather than conscious policy. Each branch weights the role recruiting will play in its program. Each branch employs a traditional recruiting technique of some sort or other, too many times based on the easy assumption that recruiting grows out of our general work without any special attention being directed to it--like rabbits when left to themselves. But recruiting is a science and an art whose main laws can be formulated. Out of this discussion should come such a set of general operating principles.

The following observations on recruiting are based upon recent experiences of Akron in this field. In somewhat over a year Akron has recruited ten people, none of whom has, to date, dropped from membership. This represents somewhat more than a good record, and one better than that of most branches, a doubling of the branch membership. While only two of the recruits can be classed as bona fide proletarians (on which subject, especially as relates to the famous "raw worker" we hope to be able to return at some future date), the techniques used are proving just as efficacious now that we are more firmly situated in the shops.

The first requisite to successful recruiting is the focusing of branch attention upon the subject. Too many times recruiting is viewed with a curious automatism, as if it somehow inevitably flows from other branch activity. Comrades relatively new to trade union work are prone to exhibit this tendency. Activity on the floor of general union meetings can be a very heady brew for the inexperienced. There are those thousand and one issues on which he can hit the floor, with the Stalinists raging, the chairman banging away with his gavel, the factions glaring across the floor at each other....With such sort of work the comrade can feel he has discharged his debt to the organization. But such work is almost purely illusory if it is not coupled with the most intense, personal activity with workers themselves. We engaged in the former sort of activity in Akron for years. And little came of it. I, for one, am very suspicious of those who justify such "activity" on the grounds of maintaining "the Trotskyist tradition" or on the grounds of its being "a long-term investment." Such statements contain an element of truth, of course, but generally they are rationalizations for avoiding the dogged, prosaic, time-consuming work of contacting among the workers in the shop itself. The influence which a party wields is measured, in the first instance, not by the number of Labor Actions it deluges a factory with, not by the number of "progressive" resolutions it can whip through a union meeting, but

by THE NUMBER OF WORKERS IT HAS IN ITS RANKS. No amount of the most genial rhetoric can keep one from facing that blunt fact.

Politics has been defined as the art of proportion. That is not bad. It is time we introduce some proportion into our recruiting work. With comrades working long hours in the shop, with so many drafted into the armed forces, we cannot be so spendthrift of our time as we were in the depression days. It has to be carefully allotted among our various activities. A major segment should be assigned to recruiting, when we can visit contacts, go bowling with them, have them up to our house, go to the show with them, etc. If this means a cut in "broad" trade union work, let it be done, after carefully weighing the problem. Trade unions have such a dearth of talent that it is almost impossible for our people to remain immersed in the turbulent waters of trade union life; we bob to the surface like corks. Comrades find themselves nabbed for all sorts of work. And if they are not careful they soon find themselves loaded down like the jackasses they are with imposed and self-imposed burdens. A careful selection of union work, chiefly that which puts one in contact with the rank and file, has to be made. Similar cuts in time may have to be made with the distribution of LABOR ACTION. LABOR ACTION has done and is doing a great work in breaking the soil and planting the seed. Let us allow ourselves time for cultivating and harvesting the crop.

Classes! Once the initial contact has been made, Akron has found no better method for the political and organizational integration of recruits than by weekly classes. They are an integral part of the recruiting process. That a person wants to join our branch after more or less close acquaintances with us is not sufficient. We put him through a two or three (or more) months' course of weekly classes. In that time we get to know our man: his knowledge, his seriousness, his punctuality, etc. And he gets to know us. At the end of that period if he meets our tolerances, as it were, we take him into the organization. We have had occasion to reject not a few who did not meet our standards during this period of mutual evaluation. By this screening process we have had not experiences with those gypsies who camp restlessly a month or two in the organization and then drift elsewhere. Those people whom we take in mesh smoothly into the party train of gears.

The class procedure is important. Everybody is provided with a text. Each person can then come prepared to discuss, to question, to amplify from his personal experience. He is not lectured at; the "teacher" leads the "class" through the highways and byways of the text using the Socratic method of question and answer. At the end of the discussion there are usually refreshments.

Securing suitable texts has been extremely difficult, despite a meticulous canvassing of all sources. Temple's "ABC of Marxism" was undoubtedly the best text we used, since it gives a rounded view of the Marxist world outlook. Revised, it should be studied by every recruit to our party. The party study course on the state by Shachtman made an excellent text also. (The other study courses, such as the one on trade unionism, which we taught, are not utilizable in their present outline form.)

Judd's "India in Rev lt" was good. The pamphlet titled "Theses and Founding Conference Documents of the Fourth International" is not fruitful for class work. Nor was Guerin's "Fascism and Big Business." Among texts which we are contemplating using in the near future are: Felix Morrow's "Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain," Ernest Lund's "Plenty for All," and Jack Hardy's "The First American Revolution." In general, as can be seen, we take subjects relevant to the current scene in one way or another. There are two texts which we need badly: a short "History of the Russian Revolution" (the lesson of this event we should know above all! How many do?), and "The History of the Fourth International."

Having all the foregoing in mind, what should be our attitude toward Lund's proposals?

They should be rejected.

Without cavilling over the word "average", one can agree with Lund that the task before us is to recruit and hold the average trade union militant who agrees with Labor Action and agrees with its program.

To do this, Lund believes, requires a sharp turning of the helm. "We shall surely fail," says Lund, "if we approach this task with the pessimism, the dimmed-vision, the lack of sweeping imagination, the satisfaction with crumbs when loaves are available, the routinism, the conservative traditionalism, the 'we are lucky to exist at all' spirit, which is born out of a decade or more of life in a movement with a numerically stationary membership." So far, excellent! One awaits the prospect of new horizons with ill-concealed expectancy.... The solution, sad to say, is quite a letdown. Its imaginative sweep is encompassed in a proposal to water down the criteria of membership. The conception is basically false.

Lund believes that there are "thousands of workers who agree with our political program" but who do not seek to join our party, or who are not asked to join our party, because of the monastic demands made upon the membership, similar, apparently, to those made under the ascetic regime of the Greek Archio-Marxists of the early 1930's.

So far as I am acquainted with the party, and so far as I am acquainted with the average mid-west American worker, the situation described by Lund does not exist in any major degree. Is Lund willing to maintain that there is any individual running around loose in our organization (not to speak of an entire branch!) who would refuse to accept the membership of a worker who "has not read Lenin on organization," and who also has family commitments, owns a home, cultivates an acre or so of ground perhaps, and is unwilling to upll up stakes on his present job and "colonize" in Pittsburgh--is there any individual in the organization who would oppose such a worker's joining? I doubt it. I have too much confidence in the intelligence of the membership to believe it. If such people exist, let's straighten them out.

No, the main reason workers do not join us is that they do not politically agree with us. That 40,000 circulation of Labor Action has a certain fictitious character. Those 40,000 papers are largely given away. They do not constitute a stable, interested clientele, such as goes regularly each week to the newsstand to buy a copy of Life. 40,000 papers are given to workers who represent all shades of political development, only a small percentage of whom can be close to us. Of that percentage which is sympathetic to us, a good number are attracted by the "reformist" aspect of Labor Action as we have indicated. It is the political disagreement which they possess that is the stumbling block. Once political agreement with us is achieved, it has been our experience that the other problems of activity, finances, etc., follow smoothly as a matter of course.

If the sackcloth and ashes regime, against which our humanist Lund inveighs, is the deadliest sin, certainly the charge of maintaining such a regime cannot be leveled against the SWP. Its standards are notoriously low, even to the point, as some comrades know, of retaining admitted psychotics, persons who say publicly they have no place in any political organization, etc. Yet one fails to note the masses of workers beating a path to the SWP. In fact, to one versed in Cannon lore and adept in interpreting the delphic utterances of the master, it is apparent that the question of recruiting is being posed for him also. His solution, prompted also, no doubt, by certain inner-organization tensions, is a romance with labor party politics. No, it is not a question of the Spartan regime in our organizations.

That with Lund it is not only a question of the barracks and battlefield regime is shown in his statement of minimal conditions for membership. "What would we expect," Lund says, "of the members of such a new branch? Politically, we would expect workers to agree with this minimum program, (a) the class struggle, (b) the need for a workers state. Organizationally, we would expect (a) regular attendance at branch meetings, (b) a modest financial contribution, (c) conducting himself as a party member in his union, (d) the promotion of Labor Action among his shopmates and friends." There is a program which can mean everything or nothing, depending on what content is poured into it! It is a program more suitable to the old yipsels than to our party, which is nothing if it is not a vanguard organization. Lund would seem to want it otherwise.

In general, Lund idealizes the old yipsels. The yipsels contributed a great deal to our organization, that is indisputable, but there was also a great deal of hokum in it. By its inclusiveness, it could breed organisms like the Sherman group, the Corbett group, etc. That Lund's proposals would lead to the same sort of looseness in the Workers Party today is evident by the concrete proposal (one of the few he makes, incidentally) he advances for a hypothetical situation in Chicago. Listen: "In Chicago we have a branch of a dozen comrades old in the movement, with ingrained habits and outlooks. If we have seven or eight people on the South Side or the West Side who subscribe to the paper, agree with our line, are ready to work with us, we would go about organizing them into a branch. We might first organize a class or discussion group as preparatory to forming the branch. When we have had three or four sessions, we would add several experienced comrades to the new recruits and constitute a new branch."

The first question that comes to mind is that if we have "seven or eight" people "who subscribe to our paper, agree with our line, are ready to work with us," what, if they are serious people at all, prevents them from being full-fledged members right now? If all they need is "three or four" class sessions to make them good members, why not give them the "three or four" sessions immediately, take them in, and have done with it. And if they aren't good prospects, what earthly good are "three or four" class sessions going to do? Only two conclusions are possible: either this is metaphysics or Lund is intending to water down the party politically and organizationally.

This is corroborated by the warnings and qualifications Lund introduces about the intended course. And it is true that with a party such as he proposes the first serious task or crisis would split it wide open.

From the point of view of our organizational principles, how close do we approximate a bolshevik norm? Fairly close, I would say. There can be no falling away from this norm without seriously weakening our striking power. This is not a matter of pride in self, but a question of firmly adhering to principles tested in practice by the great bolshevik party of Russia, our model in these matters. And at what level does the political level of the membership stand? Here, one must confess: lower than it should. Far from enduring a further deterioration of this level, as Lund's course would guarantee, we should be moving heaven and earth to raise it to the level which history will imperiously demand of us in the coming months and years. When one hears of comrades, "New York comrades" if you will, seriously debating whether to elect an organizer or not, those opposing such an election doing so on the grounds that an organizer would lead to the growth of bureaucratism, one is all the less disposed to tamper with the educational qualifications for membership.

But what to do with these workers who "agree" but will not join? Oh, enigma of enigmas! They will remain close to us in trade union caucuses, political classes, as Labor Action men, spreading our propaganda, helping us in our union activity. As they mature politically under our guidance and under the great teacher, life itself, they will come to us. Courageous. Tough. Educated. Our Volodarskys and our Evdokimovs.

To sum up: the main obstacle in the path of our recruiting lies in the retarded political consciousness of the working class. But "the political situation is extremely favorable to us"? True, but consciousness always lags behind events. Our task is to prepare ourselves politically and organizationally, to work indefatigably, in order to capitalize on the steadily maturing radicalization which is taking place in the working class. This radicalization manifests itself in most unexpected forms. To the superficial observer the tremendous sums invested in war bonds are a sign of the patriotism of the people. They are that in part. But so far as the working class is concerned they are a gigantic vote of non-confidence in the present regime. The war bonds are being bought as a cushion for the thundering depression they all feel is coming after the war. The same fear is prompting the frantic buying of homes and farms ("At least we'll have something to eat"), and the painting and repair programs that are occupying so much of workers' time.

To say that we cannot recruit at all, as some say, is nonsense. The question is to know the limits within which we can recruit. "Freedom is the recognition of necessity." The rest, if Lund will pardon us, is a question of orientation, of the allocation of time, of classes, of, in short, technique. That our young bolsheviks have a lot to learn about contacting native American workers is indisputable. In the "History of the Russian Revolution" Trotsky remarks how alien the bolsheviks seemed to the average Russian workers at first. The bolsheviks' audacity, their omniscience, their iconoclasm was a bit overwhelming at first. That barrier didn't exist long. Our comrades will make their way also. The prospects, to anyone who has any relations with the working class of the United States, are nothing but encouraging.

We have our program. It is a good one. Our party constitutes a revolutionary staff, bold, resourceful, self-sacrificing, educated. Let us not be impatient with history. She is now bringing and will continue increasingly in the coming days to bring to us those worker-bolshevik leaders who will enter the socialist struggle not as a moral choice but as a basic condition of existence.

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