

MASS WORK AMONG NATIONAL GROUPS

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COMRADES: I want to speak on a few aspects of work among the national groups. The other day a Jewish cultural worker paid a compliment to our Party by asking me a question. "How is it," he said, "that when your Party was obviously more Jewish it paid less attention to the Jewish question and since you have obviously become more Gentile, you pay more attention to the Jewish question?" I answered him that if we have become more Gentile and pay more attention to national groups it is only a sign of maturity of our Party, of turning to real mass work, to the building of the People's Front against reaction,

This is what I told him, but I did not tell him about my own pride of having graduated from a second-class Party citizen to a first-class Party citizen. You all remember how "language work" was looked upon as something not quite the thing in the Party. There was a line of demarcation between Party work and language work. That time is over. And that is also a sign of the growth of the Communist Party.

The other day I had a personal compliment. I attended a conference called by the Jewish People's Committee Against Anti-Semitism and Fascism. That committee was built up in the last two years from a mere beginning to organizations affiliated with it now, numbering 300,000 members. I made a speech as delegate from the Icor. One of the Jews from a religious congregation said, "Why, he is speaking like a real Jew and I was told he was a Communist."

Comrades, this Jew expressed a very profound thought. We Communists did not know how to speak to the broad masses of the national groups in a way that would make them understand us and would insure their cooperation with us. At the convention of the Jewish Communists here in September, 1936, a slogan was advanced that the Jewish Communists are the best sons and daughters of the Jewish people. At first it was met with a great deal of suspicion. But it was a challenge, on the one hand to the Jewish organizations' leadership, on the other hand it was a promise. In Jewish mass organizations and in the Jewish press it became known that the Communists claimed to be the best sons and daughters of the Jewish people.

Comrades, we have failed in that respect. We, in former years, managed to alienate the Jewish masses. More than that, we managed to convey an idea that the Communists are hostile to the Jewish national aspirations. We fought Zionism, which was correct; but in fighting Zionism, in some way or other, we forgot that many progressive elements of the Jewish people were Zionistically inclined. We forgot also that the craving, the desire, for nationhood is not in itself reactionary, although Zionism is reactionary. We fought Zionism, but identified

its leaders with the mass of followers. We conveyed the impression that the Jewish people who live in Palestine are our enemies and we are theirs. It took us a long time to overcome these errors which alienated us from the broad Jewish masses.

We stated that the Communists are the best leaders of the Jews, and we can become the leaders of the Jewish people and we think that the Communists in every national group can become the leaders of those national groups.

But this must be a conscious effort and it must be approached in a certain fashion. I will only repeat what was mentioned in the resolution about the trade union leaders; and will point to one leader, although there are many such, namely, Comrade Ben Gold. Comrade Ben Gold has established himself as a trade union leader of the Jewish people. He could bring the Jewish problem first of all to the Jewish furriers, and the majority of the furriers are Jewish, by mobilizing the furriers to act on behalf of the Jews, as a national group, to act in defense of Jewish rights. He could become and can become a leader of the Jews. There must be the consciousness among the Communists to work in national groups.

The objective conditions are available for such work. Both events in Europe and in the United States have aroused the great masses of the national groups. On the one hand, the march of fascism, on the other hand humiliation and national persecution that go with it. Then the growth of anti-Semitism, fascism, anti-alienism in the United States creates conditions which make it possible to approach the masses and speak to them about their every-day problems. The question of deportation was mentioned here. Yesterday at the commission meeting it was mentioned that wage cuts are first visited upon the so-called aliens. This is something that will arouse and activize the broadest masses of the national group workers.

You remember very well how not so long ago—and even now—reactionaries spread propaganda that there are seven million unemployed aliens and if they were not here there would be no unemployment. I will not speak here about anti-Semitism—that is well known to you. The humiliation that an alien suffers in this country, the discrimination, the names he is called, and the main thing, the discrimination in getting a job—all this makes it possible for us to organize the broad masses of national groups, and mobilize them in defense of their rights and in the Democratic Front, and People's Front against reaction and fascism. But we must have confidence in the masses. We must know that it is possible for us to link ourselves to these people so that they will listen to us if we have something vital to tell them. We must know how to lead the national groups.

The Party must know what is going on in the life of every national group. The problems that confront us immediately are very complicated. I want to speak about a few of them. Sectarianism, of course, has been overcome to a great extent. We have traveled far from those days in 1935 when good Jewish comrades protested against me for having written in the *Morning Freiheit* that it was wrong to boo and hiss and start a demonstration at a good People's Front conference just because a man whom we hated was there. Well, those times are past. Our people have learned. Of course, there are still remnants

of those times when we were all-wise, and all-knowing and all-holy and the more sharply we spoke, and the more acrimoniously we expressed ourselves the better Communists we were. We are far from those times when everybody who was not with us was against us. Now we are beginning to learn that everybody who is not with us is potentially with us if we approach him properly.

Another danger which is very important and to which we must call attention is the danger of nationalism. Let me quote you what Lenin said: "It is impermissible either directly or indirectly to advance the slogan of national culture." Now, that's definite and he repeated that statement many times. Another time he said, "He who directly or indirectly poses the slogan of Jewish national culture is an enemy of the proletariat." Comrade Dimitroff said, "We Communists are not supporters of national nihilism, and should never act as such."

Here we have two extremes. We must not advance the slogan of national culture but we must not be national nihilists. We must steer a correct road. How can we reconcile this? Do we have no national pride? Do we have no national consciousness? Oh, no! said Lenin, "Are we enlightened Great Russian proletarians impervious to the feeling of national pride? Certainly not! We love our language and our motherland. We, more than any other group, are working to raise its laboring masses to the level of intelligent democrats and socialists. We are proud of the fact that we have given the world Radishchev, the Decembrists, the declassé revolutionaries of the seventies; that in 1905 the Great-Russian working class created a powerful revolutionary party of the masses."

"We Great-Russians are proud," and Comrade Dimitroff echoes this statement when he declares: "I was not wrong in taking up the defense of the national honor of the toiling masses of the Bulgarian people, who are struggling heroically against the fascist usurpers, the real barbarians and savages; nor was I wrong in declaring that I had no cause to be ashamed of being a Bulgarian, but that, on the contrary, I was proud of being a son of the heroic Bulgarian working class."

This shows the road. We must follow that road. We declare: *we* are the nation, not the bourgeoisie. Lenin said, "There are two national cultures in each national culture. There is the Great-Russian culture of the Purishkevitchs, Gutchkovs and Struves—but there is also the Great-Russian culture which is characterized by the names of Chernyshevsky and Plekhanov." We take this nationalism. We declare that we represent the best, the most revolutionary, the most progressive, the most constructive there is in the nation and with this we can approach the broad masses of the national groups. When I was challenged by the Fish Committee in 1930—that "if you don't like America, go back where you came from," I told them that I am proud of having identified myself with the great American working class and that I feel myself as much an American, because the country belongs to those who toil and not to those who exploit. We take from the national culture the labor movement, the revolutionary movement, the humanitarian achievements. We take everything that is progressive, we throw away everything that is reactionary.

In this respect we have had great experiences in organizing the People's Front

in the cultural field among the Jews. We made considerable progress. We helped organize the World Alliance for Jewish Culture, with branches in twenty-three countries. We proceed from the idea that the broad masses of the people are socialists and we take it for granted that culture for the people is a means of improving their conditions today, and a means for introducing socialism in the future. And this is how we approach the Jewish people's culture. However, as Communists, we must distinguish between the broader aspects of the people's culture, between what is progressive and humanitarian in that culture, and that which is an actual proletarian contribution. We are creating culture. Therefore it is necessary that we Communists should create Communist culture within the framework of the people's culture. At the same time as we are contributing to the people's culture, our contribution should be distinct. We are interested in the Jewish people, but more interested in the Jewish workers, in the revolutionary traditions of the Jewish masses. This is what must be our contribution to the Jewish culture. You may not call it proletarian, call it revolutionary, but the main thing is to give your contribution. But also when we deal with liberals of the Jewish bourgeoisie who are willing to work in the cultural field, we must make our contribution. Our strength must be that we do not come empty-handed to work with these people. We must come heavily laden with riches—riches of the revolutionary traditions—thus influencing the people of that national group among whom we are working.

Some of our achievements in the cultural field among the Jewish people have been great; to mention only the theatre, the choruses, in publishing. We have profoundly impressed the honest believers in culture among the Jewish bourgeoisie to the extent that they are forced to recognize us. We have taken over the distribution of the Jewish classics—the works of Sholom Aleichem, Mendele Mocher Sforim and Peretz—the *Freiheit* has taken them over completely. We have published the works of Sholom Aleichem, printed them and sold a great many books of the whole twenty-eight volumes. The prestige that this gave the Jewish comrades cannot be estimated because in the twenty-two years since the death of Sholom Aleichem, perhaps an equal number of his books have been sold in the U.S.A. by the bourgeois agencies. Thus we establish ourselves as the inheritors of the best in Jewish culture. On the strength of our Communist contribution we are distinguished from the others.

But in this there are two dangers—the danger of nationalism is one. When we begin to work in the field of national groups, we may veer to the Right and work like nationalists. The other danger is national nihilism. On the one hand national fetishism, and on the other you might call it assimilationism. We must remember what Lenin said about this, and also Stalin and Dimitroff. We are internationalists, because we are for the unification of all the toiling masses of all nationalities. We are internationalists because we are in favor of uniting all the toilers today, thus opening the road for the struggle for socialism. But we must distinguish very carefully in our internationalism as to what's what; and some of our comrades are inclined to veer one way or the other. We have our national pride, but we must not wound the national pride of those who do not think as we think. In the National Group Commission it was pointed out that there are Italians who identify the rise of Italy as a nation

with Mussolini, and our comrades therefore consider these Italians fascists. There are many good Germans who identify the overthrow of the yoke of Versailles with Hitler, and cannot understand our comrades who say: "Down with Hitler." We are conducting an anti-Japanese boycott, but we must make it clear that this is a boycott to break the power of the military clique in Japan and not to hurt the people of Japan. The same with the boycott of German goods, which is not directed against the German people. We must be careful to make this clear, and not to wound the national sensibilities of the people of these countries. We must be careful not to become national fetishists. We must use culture as a means of uniting all the toilers, and not the toilers and exploiters of each particular nationality. We must use it as a means of struggle to improve their life today and advance toward socialism in the future. The same thing holds true of the struggle for national existence. If the Jews in Austria protest against Hitler, that is the right of national existence which we support and advance. But when Mussolini for the sake of national existence says that Italy must have Ethiopia, that kind of national existence must be combated.

There is one method used by the bourgeoisie to keep the masses tied to its leadership, and this is to keep them from mass action. We must fight against this. It must be our aim to activize the masses, but we must not use general phrases. I must of necessity use general phrases, because I couldn't do anything more concrete in a half hour allotted to me.

We have leaders among the Jews who say "You go to the synagogue, and I will go to Washington to the State Department to talk things over." We say to such leaders: we can't depend on those who just go to Washington. I suppose the same is to be found among other national groups.

We must learn not to scoff at religion. We Jewish Communists thought we had to wage war against God, so we just waged war against God, alienating the masses. When we learn to talk to the religious workers, and win them over, then they will learn the truth about religion. I think we must be very careful to learn in this respect from Comrade Browder. We must learn to link the specific problems and specific struggles of the national groups with the broader problems of American life. There is a danger of keeping the national masses within their ghettos, and the nationalist leaders often wish to keep the masses away from the stream of American life. It is our task to unite and bring these national groups into the broader stream of political and social life, by linking up their problems. It can be done. We must teach the national group masses to be proud of being Americans, being Americans of our kind, fighting Americans. I had an experience, when I spoke to our Jews. They were happy when I related to them that when they are told to go back where they came from they must answer that this country belongs to those who built it up. It doesn't matter whether they speak English or Jewish, whether they came to this country two years ago, or twenty years ago, or 200 years ago.

In order to improve our work, we must keep contact among the national groups. This is the weakest link in our work. We must learn how to work together, to let the *Daily Worker* know what is going on among the national groups. Those who read our press, English or any other language, must know

We need more people, we are running out of the supply of Communist cadres. We must train our people. I am glad to hear we are going to give special training to people in national groups. We need a training school for national groups in our Party to train leaders.

Another point, which the Russians have stressed, and that is nativization. We should have people belonging to certain national groups work in those groups and not let them be shifted from one place to another, from one kind of work to another. Let them become rooted in the life of the national group. I have not yet reconciled myself to the fact that three outstanding leaders were taken away from the Jewish work. Comrades Weiner, Steinberg and Mindel were taken away from us. If we had them we would have a bigger movement among the Jewish people. I do not demand their return, but I do demand that those working among the Jews should become deeply rooted, should be recognized as Jewish leaders, as Jewish Communists.

Do not hide the face of the Party. Remember, you must win respect for your Party by being a Jewish Communist or Italian Communist or Polish Communist or any kind of Communist, by being what you are, by laying the best plans for work, by defending the rights of the people, taking up the important problems of the people, acting always as a Communist. Of course, there may be conditions where you cannot say outright you are a Communist, but wherever possible do not apologize for being a Communist, but be proud of being a Communist and a man of the people working with the people.

The danger of Trotskyism and Lovestoneism among the national groups is even stronger than among the English speaking and native Americans. We have to guard against that.

We need young American-born leaders. American-born Jews, Italians, Poles, Irish and the others must realize that they must work among these national groups, they must represent the new generation of leadership of the national groups. They must speak as Americans to Americans. They must defend the right of Americans who are German Americans, Jewish Americans, Italian Americans, and they must be the leaders.

The national groups must become articulate as national groups. Official America, liberal America, even New Deal America doesn't recognize officially the existence of national groups. The time has come when these groups shall become articulate, and this articulation must come through the American-born people who will lead them, and this leadership must be built on actual needs, on the understanding of the every-day problems, on advancing the correct solution. Thus we shall be able to organize the People's Front among the various national groups as part of the great People's Front of struggle against war, reaction, fascism and for socialism.