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Communist Work as a Trade Union Official

This paper was written to convey some of my experiences and those of other comrades who are elected to positions in unions, and the successes and problems around developing agit-prop work in this capacity. Because there are not many comrades who have positions like these, the experience from which we have to draw is rather limited. But we hope the discussion of this paper, and future discussion of the work in general, can broaden our understanding of this aspect of trade union work for the benefit of the entire Party.

Setting Plans and Goals

During the present period, when we are engaged in a process of fighting to formalize the relations within the Party and collectivizing the decisions that we make, the decision to become an elected representative (hereafter known as a "rep") is not one to be made lightly. The days in which we can say "there is a position open; I think I'll run" are over. The financial expense of some campaigns, the time-consuming nature of the election process in many of them, and the pressures of the jobs themselves must be well thought out and discussed in the comrade's fraction/unit, and if the position is high enough and/or influential enough, the District and Center should be consulted as well and concrete agreements made. This is important also if the comrade has an internal Party assignment and considerations of his or her time must be made.

It is important that in these discussions goals of some sort be set up. For instance, will the position be used to establish relations with particular individuals within the trade union hierarchy? How can the comrade influence the type or quality of the struggles within the union? How will the position aid in recruitment into the Party and in establishing the Party's leadership in the shop? In what ways can the position facilitate the creation or expansion of the *People's Tribune*

and shop paper networks? In what ways can the comrade's position be used to aid the Party's work outside the shop (i.e., in coalitions, election campaigns, etc.)? How can the election campaign build the influence, contacts, and recruits of the Party, even if the election is lost?

If these types of goals are set up I believe it will help offset the tendency to get elected and then just drift, taking care of the everyday shop problems without a real focus to the work. This has led to a great deal of demoralization and the inability of the Party to take advantage of the skills and positions that the comrades and the Party (and of course the workers who elected us) have invested so much time and energy in achieving.

Why Become a Union Representative?

It can give us inroads to other areas of struggle or a broader base for struggle, such as making valuable contacts among progressives in the union, making connections with other unions, etc. Our influence can facilitate the polarization of the trade union leaders and members in the fight for the independence of the labor movement, which is now tailing the Democratic Party. It can give us the ability to write for trade union papers and other publications and in that way to popularize our Party's positions. In the shop itself there is a greater physical mobility of reps; just the plain ability to get around and legally talk to workers is an advantage, especially when this mobility can be used as a cover for the distribution of the shop paper and the *People's Tribune*.

Also, you are in a position in which the workers come to you to solve their problems, and they inevitably look to you for the answers for other questions concerning them as well. As a result, your relationship to and discussions with them are pivotal in influencing their outlook on the contradiction between labor and capital and its resolution. This does not say that the only way that you can be a leader of the workers is to become a rep, for being a rep has some drawbacks. But in many ways having such a position concretizes one's leadership and gives it a legitimate form.

The Problem With Being a Union Representative

In discussions I have had with comrades who are reps, there is a real sense of frustration and inability really to *do* anything once we get the positions. Part of this comes from not really having a clear sense of just

what we are supposed to be doing with the job. But I also think that part of the problem is the environment in which we are operating, i.e., the objective situation within the trade union movement. We are no longer in the position that prevailed during the rise of the trade unions, when reps were looked upon as respected fighters for the working class. Although we may be respected, I know that sometimes we must be viewed by the workers as somewhat masochistic for taking on such a "thankless" job and fighting such oft-times losing battles. Far too often we become looked upon as just a part of the union structure, which purports to fight in the workers' interests yet in reality can do so little to ease the problems of everyday working.

Because the trade union movement as such can deal only in the economic struggle for better wages and working conditions, the unions cannot, nor could they ever, be the main instrument for leading workers to the resolution of the problems of capitalism, the overthrow of the bourgeois state apparatus. This political struggle can be led only by a political party of the working class. This limitation, combined with the precarious position that the unions are now in—attempting to withstand the effects of declining membership, unable to organize the South, confronted with anti-union right-to-work propaganda—puts the unions on the defensive. Also, suffering from their own sell-out, class-collaborationist practices of past years, the unions face stiff resistance from external forces and from within as well. As a result, the very existence of the union, its necessity and effectiveness, must be defended to its *own members*. This may not be true for some unions, i.e., some coal mining and other southern unions and the like which are becoming more militant and understand the nature of the attacks on the union and rise up to its defense. But, in many locals, the workers are sick of having to pay union dues and to claim allegiance to a body which appears to be, and often is, completely unable to solve even minor problems on the shop floor, let alone provide any solutions to the problems of inflation, political representation, etc. This disillusionment with the unions is especially prevalent among younger workers who don't even have the history and experience of the early union struggles to convince them that the unions were at any time effective. The attitude often is, "The union might have been good then; but it's good for nothing now!" These workers are ripe for anti-union propa-

ganda and our role as reps in combating this—and *how* we combat it — are extremely important.

Working in such a situation can be very frustrating, but this is where the Party's agit-prop is advantageous and necessary. It is only we, and those who will be won to our line, who can point out the contradictory aspects of work in the trade unions—recognition of both the inherent limitation of the struggle in the unions *and* the necessity of fighting for the defense of the trade unions and the labor movement as a whole. I think that many of us lapse into defense of the unions from a pure "union man" point of view, which is simply economism, as opposed to the viewpoint of the defense of unions as a part of the fight against the fascist attacks on the working class, the struggle to build a new labor federation, etc.

It may seem to be a small point, but I believe that this incorrect manner of defending the unions ("my union right or wrong") permeates many aspects of our work on many different levels, be it in conversations with workers, conflicts with management, or in the way we conduct ourselves in general.

Without conveying a *strategic* understanding of the need to defend the trade unions, we cannot help but increase the frustration and helplessness that the workers feel. And since to most workers we are the only concrete connection they have with the union, the way we defend the union and explain our relationship to it is important.

Why Do The Workers Choose Us as Their Representatives?

There is no doubt that we are making some inroads into leadership positions in the unions. We hope we are respected and our leadership looked up to. But is this merely because we are good fighters? I doubt it. Many of us were elected over intense competition, and many of those opposing us were quite skilled unionists and pretty good "fighters." Therefore, if the workers merely wanted a militant, they could have chosen someone other than us. It could be said that the workers want someone who is honest and incorruptible, but they've heard that song before and know that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The reason that we are elected as their representatives is not only our ability to fight, our honesty and integrity, but also the political

line of the CLP. Through the months and years spent building a base, our positions on Taft-Hartley, on political questions external to the shop, on the inability of capitalism to solve the problems of the working class, and on other matters have left an impression on the workers with whom we come in contact. We are perceived as being different, and rightfully so.

Thus, we are elected by the workers in the hopes that we may carry that difference into the struggles as elected reps, making some significant changes in the nature of the representation they receive. Our goals are often pretty lofty as we contemplate running for these positions and as we begin our time in them. But often, as time goes by, the mundane nature of most of the day-to-day struggles wears thin the previous dreams of heroic stands against Taft-Hartley and of heart-rending pronouncements from chapters of *Capital* on speedup and militant wildcat strikes on health and safety. The day-to-day grind and the effects of never really setting any Party goals begin to take their toll. Although you still may be just as militant, that which initially distinguished you from the rest of the militants—your communist work—gradually gets put on the back burner. Because you are still being militant, you know that the workers still know that you are "different." But you are wrong. To them you are merely like the rest of the trade union reps. Trying harder, maybe, more honest, maybe, more militant, maybe, the best among the rest, maybe, but no different. Because our difference, our independence, is determined by one thing, our political line, which gives us the ability to deepen the understanding of the workers and point their activity in the direction of socialism.

Our Independence

The question of independence is not an abstract one; it has very concrete forms. It is not merely enough to depend on the comrade to let people know (as surreptitiously as possible!) that he or she is a communist, for without the concrete expressions of that—the *People's Tribune* and shop paper—such a declaration means little, if anything, and as a matter of fact leaves comrades much more vulnerable to red-baiting and confusion on the part of the workers about just what a communist is, since there is nothing the comrade can rally around and support that is a concrete manifestation of his or her communist beliefs

and activities. I have been a rep with and without the help of the shop paper and *People's Tribune* and have seen the difference in the workers' view of and relationships to me, as well as in the type of struggles that take place on the shop floor and within the union.

Agit-prop is the *only* concrete form of communist work (unless you are under strict security and your assignment takes on a different form). It is with this weapon that the workers understand that although the rep may make some real compromises and even suffer serious defeats at the hands of the company, the paper can deal with the question of the status of the labor movement and why it is in such a weak position. It can also talk about the inevitable victory of the proletariat, and how to attain it, as well as about the struggle on the shop floor. Moreover, the *People's Tribune* and the shop paper talk not just to one worker, as with the one-to-one relationships on most grievances, but to however many workers read them. Also, the maintaining of the shop paper and *People's Tribune* networks reaffirms the workers' decision to choose a communist to represent them, as it shows that the comrade has not gotten so completely immersed in trade unionism that the *People's Tribune* and shop paper have been forgotten or attended to as an afterthought (unless the shop paper begins to look like a union publication, which is just as bad).

The *People's Tribune* speaks to issues of international and national significance, and comrades should try to write articles about struggles in the shops as well. Many of our comrades are by themselves in shops and a division of labor in the unit (such as *Peters'* talks about) often cannot be done. A part of our problem in putting out shop papers on a consistent basis stems from the sheer difficulty of their writing and reproduction. But even when the shop paper cannot come out the comrades should be continuing to build and expand their *People's Tribune* routes.

Grievances and Other Practical Work

As far as a detailed discussion of the how-to's of grievances is concerned, experience is the only teacher. Comrades who are seriously pursuing this type of work and want to better understand the practical aspects of grievances, arbitrations, contract negotiations, etc., should take advantage of the courses that community colleges and local unions

may offer on these subjects. Our discussion here should center on the relationship of certain shop struggles to the development of the Party and the base that the comrade is building at the plant. As most of the comrades who are reps will tell you, the development of the political struggle of the proletariat for socialism is not hinged upon the majority of grievances that you get. For example, worker X got beat out of .0035 hours of overtime or worker Y got suspended for smoking dope in the warehouse and wants the suspension lifted and pay for the time off. I think you catch my drift. These problems are part of the everyday grind and must be dealt with, for only to deal with the earth-shattering grievances and not with the "little" ones will not win you the next election and you might not even make it until then.

Grievances on discrimination, speedup, overtime during layoffs, among others, can more effectively be used to explain to the workers the root cause of these problems being the capitalist system and the solution socialism. For example, a discrimination grievance from a Negro worker, which I had to urge her to file because she was afraid not only of repercussions from the company but also of ostracism from the Anglo-American workers (my plant is about 80 per cent white), was won not only on the merit of the grievance itself but also because I was able to agitate among her Anglo-American co-workers on the necessity of supporting her in this grievance. And in a real victory a comrade in another area of work was able to win—in contract negotiations during a difficult strike—wage and classification parity for Filipino workers, which was a real step forward in forging the unity of the workers in the hospital she is in, where this division is very pronounced. This could never have been won were it not for the work that had been done before and during the strike with the comrade's shop paper and the *People's Tribune*, which for months explained the theoretical and practical need to fight united in this struggle and which led to a practical victory.

The Future

Any comrade negotiating a contract or otherwise involved in this type of activity will have to deal with the question of wage and price controls and will be under a great deal of pressure to produce the best

possible contract under very difficult circumstances. (Part of this depends on whether the unions adopt a stance of militant opposition or of acquiescence.) We should be preparing now to take this struggle to the workers, to lift it from the limited realm of the negotiating table onto the political front, exposing the capitalists' inflation program as putting the burden of the spiralling crisis on the backs of the proletariat.

Taft-Hartley is a question that the unions will have to address. During all contract negotiations, all major struggles and grievances, we should raise to the workers the need to repeal Taft-Hartley. And I am sure that this struggle will take very practical forms as the organization of the South becomes a part of even contract talks themselves in the future.

As members of the CLP, our role as elected officials will be key. The leadership of the trade union movement will realize that the only ones who can generate enthusiasm and militance, as well as urge the membership to fight to protect the unions from the fascist anti-union drive, appear to be the communists. But here these bureaucrats find themselves in a tremendous cross—how to utilize the vigor and understanding of the communists while isolating the "ism." We will have tremendous opportunities but a tremendous set of problems as well. Therefore, we must ground ourselves, our Party, and our *People's Tribune* and shop papers among the people whom we represent in order to consolidate our influence.

I hope that this paper can act as a starting point for more discussion.