

*The second article in a continuing series on the history of the MLP:*

## Organizing in the workplace, Part I: Work in the Trade Unions

by Jake

The Marxist-Leninist Party, USA was well regarded by many leftists for its ability to organize inside factories and other workplaces. Certainly it was hated by the employers it organized against.

The MLP organized in factories to popularize communism and to recruit revolutionary-minded workers. But it was also a major goal of the MLP to be able to launch and lead struggles against the bosses, the capitalists. We had some success in this, particularly in focusing the demands of our co-workers and in finding ways for people to fight back when the workers had no strong organization. It was these small successes which gave the MLP a reputation as a factory organizer.

However, in regard to recruiting revolutionary-minded workers into the Party and to building party organization inside workplaces, the MLP was less successful. Although the MLP did recruit factory workers, it did not bring in enough to offset the number of members who left over the years.

Nor did the MLP build any lasting party organization in workplaces. We did manage to create what we called a "pro-party trend" in several workplaces, but the trend and its nascent organizations did not sustain themselves. In the early 1980s the MLP had expectations that the small organizations and institutions that it was creating in the working class would take on a life of their own as class conflicts intensified. Please note that for the MLP, the 1980s was to be "a decade of great class battles." History read otherwise.

The Party membership declined through the 1980s and early '90s. This declining membership was a factor in the MLP's internal crisis of 1992 and its death in 1993. Since the MLP's major recruiting effort was in the factories at a time when the workers' movement was receding, one might argue that the MLP's policy of factory concentration contributed to its death. However, factory concentration was central to the MLP's politics and its history; to what it was and to who was in it. Furthermore, groups that focused on recruiting elsewhere, for example college campuses or housing projects, did not fare much better. Although recruiting is an issue for revolutionary organizations, I think the failure of the MLP to recruit sufficient members does not negate the

need for socialist revolutionaries to organize in the workplace, especially in industrial production.

The fact that the MLP managed to rally workers for fights against their employers and, moreover, rallied them under a communist banner, was an impressive feat in the 1980s and early '90s.

For the MLP, building organization inside workplaces was essential to organizing the working class and to socialist revolution. As such, MLP activists put a great deal of their energy toward this effort. While it may or may not be accurate to say that, for the MLP as a whole, workplace organizing was our prime activity, it had to run at least a close second. For many Party militants, myself included, organizing in the workplace was our reason to live.

The MLP's approach to organizing in workplaces was to build fighting organizations inside the plants. This organization was not necessarily trade unions, but an apparatus that offered workers who wanted to battle the company a role to play. This approach is markedly different from that of many other left groups who often viewed work in trade unions or the organizing of new trade unions as the essence of workplace organizing.

For example, SWP activists hired into one factory in Chicago (Bodine Electric Company) and were surprised to find that the union was inactive. Since their approach to organizing was based on work inside the union, they couldn't figure out what to do. They soon left for other jobs.

Some years later another SWP activist hired in. She was active against the Persian Gulf War, and she promoted some of the demonstrations taking place against the war. Certainly we welcomed her efforts to organize her co-workers to oppose the war. However, her approach was not to organize a fight against the employers, nor to build organization inside the plant. After the war, she ran for City Clerk.

This isn't to say that the type of approach I attribute to SWP is pointless. It may serve SWP's aims quite well. Furthermore, the idea of concentrating political work inside existing unions has a strong appeal with some worker activists who want to reform the unions and make them real fighting workers' organizations. It then makes sense to focus on places with active unions and leave the unorganized factories for later.

However, this approach will not build fighting organi-

zation on the shop floor nor, in my opinion, can it build a trend for communism.

### **The MLP's trade union policy**

For Marxist-Leninists, trade union work is necessary but not sufficient for workplace organizing. The MLP did have a trade union policy, although it was not as elaborate as the policies of other left organizations. The MLP documents that best explained it are the resolutions of the Second Congress of the MLP. The resolution on "Revolutionary work in the factories and the trade unions" has a section titled "Work in the Trade Unions" which states:

*"The Marxist-Leninist Party carries out work both in the factories and, where they exist, in the trade unions. However, the work in the unions is carried out as a part of the Party's general factory work and not the other way around."* (*Workers' Advocate*, vol. 14 n. 1, January 1984. The full text of this resolution is presented on p. 34).

Basically, if there were an existing union at the workplace, the MLP unit (or cell) that was organizing there was supposed to assess it and decide how much of its energies should go towards work inside that union.

### **What did the MLP do in the unions?**

**Work in union meetings.** As a general rule, we attended union meetings if there were "ordinary workers" present. That is, if it was a meeting of only union functionaries (elected officers, stewards), we didn't bother. If, on the other hand, there was some attendance by the rank and file, or if there was some indication that the rank and file might turn up at the meeting, then the MLP activists had to consider going to the meeting with a plan of action.

When we had a following among the workers at a given plant, we would try to mobilize them to go with us and fight together. Often the motivation for going to a meeting was a feeling among the rank and file that they should go to the union meeting and "do something." The MLP took up the question of what the rank and file should do at those meetings. If the MLP felt it was necessary to issue a call for the workers to attend a meeting, we spelled out in a leaflet exactly what the workers should do there. Not surprisingly, this usually meant opposing the sellout pro-capitalist, capitulationist politics of the labor bureaucrats and pushing for action against the company.

Being a communist revolutionary is often difficult, and for the years that I was active with the MLP, there were

certainly many trying times. But there were also those times when our work bore obvious fruit and reaffirmed our belief in what we were doing. For me, several of these joyous occasions came when the MLP intervened in mass union meetings.

For example, in Detroit during the concessions contract years of 1979 to 1981, Mark Stepp (and Fetchit), head of the UAW's Chrysler section, was ripped to shreds by an MLP activist at a big meeting. Auto workers, angry over the sellout by the UAW leadership, poured out of the union meeting shouting slogans and arguments provided by the MLP speaker. Workers stepped forward to help distribute our leaflets. In other meetings that week, auto workers confronted UAW officials and used our arguments verbatim. We did not succeed in stopping the concessions, but we did concentrate what was wrong with the concessions contracts, and we focused the anger of the workers onto the auto capitalists and their lackeys, rather than on Japanese workers.

**Contract negotiations and ratifications.** The MLP was always involved with union activities and union politics when contracts were at stake. The MLP did not have a policy whether it should try to be on the negotiating team or not, but it did publish and distribute a great deal of literature on contract demands and proposals and ratifications.

Generally, the MLP approached contracts by trying to develop the workers' demands before negotiations started. We wanted to let the rank and file workers, rather than the union leadership, set the tone for the union negotiations.

**Campaigns inside the union.** When the MLP ran campaigns on political issues, it brought them into the workplaces. It might even take them into the union if it was an active organization. This included submitting resolutions to the union meetings in support of mass actions against imperialism or racism, for example. The idea was to encourage workers to take part in those actions and for the union to encourage (rather than discourage) such participation.

**Running for union office.** On rare occasions we ran candidates for office. We even won a few times.

For about one year, the president of the blue-collar union at Roswell Park Hospital in Buffalo was an MLP activist who was elected as a communist running on a platform of "mass active resistance" to the attacks of the hospital administration. The union's executive board removed him from office on baseless charges, but even for

some time after his removal, he was called “the president” by the rank and file and served as a *de facto* union leader.

Once elected to a union position, the activist members of the MLP became so busy with union duties that it left them little time for party work. Partly because of the Roswell Park experience, the MLP’s Central Committee ruled that no member could seek union office without getting permission from the national leadership. This doesn’t mean that the MLP disfavored running candidates in union elections, but it did recognize that for a small organization, winning an election could result in a serious drain of its resources.<sup>1</sup>

Keep in mind that trade union work was generally only a fraction of the party cell’s “general factory work.” However, the General Rules of the MLP<sup>2</sup> did allow for a unit to concentrate most of its efforts on organizing inside the union. For example, if a comrade was elected to a union post, or if circumstances required it, the party cell could be organized as the MLP’s “fraction” inside the union.

**“Organizing the unorganized.”** As far as I know, the MLP did not create any new unions in its history, although it agitated for and supported several organizing drives.

Frequently the *Workers’ Advocate* cited organizing the unorganized as a pressing task for the working class, but a task that the existing pro-capitalist trade unions would never take up in earnest. Since the MLP hated all of the existing unions as pro-capitalist saboteurs of the workers’ movement, it was probably difficult for the MLP to organize new unions with the enthusiasm that it showed in other endeavors.

**Building the existing union.** In practice the MLP did not do much to build the organization of existing unions. This was due largely to the fact that the union bureaucracies were not willing to fight, except against their own militants. Why then, should activists build more organizations for them to misuse? However, at Roswell Park Hospital, the MLP activist who was elected President started a “stewards committee” which proved to be very effective in strengthening the union, and also started a local union publication, the “President’s Newsletter.”

The MLP’s policy was determined by the character of the particular union local. In general terms, the MLP’s press detailed what organization the unions should have if they were to wage a fight, but it was very cautious about building this for the union bureaucracy. For their part, the union officials didn’t want any fighting apparatus.

In open shops, the workers were likely to feel that the

first step in their getting organized was to build the union. This is not necessarily true. Usually what the workers need as their first step is to get themselves somewhat organized on the shop floor.

At Bodine, for example, we did not urge workers to join the union to make it stronger, even though this was what the workers thought we should do. Instead, we urged them to build an apparatus in the plant to be able to fight. Note that the unions at Bodine historically were ambivalent to expanding their own membership. In the early 1980s two worker activists were even fired by the company for attempting to recruit union members, and the circumstances pointed to the IAM as the one who fingered them to the company. A popular rumor in the plant held that there was a secret agreement between Bodine and its two unions (the IAM and IBEW) not to attempt to organize a closed shop.

By organizing themselves and taking action in the plant, Bodine workers were able to hold off concessions demands from the company. Furthermore, in the face of this nascent militancy of the rank and file, the unions suddenly sprouted backbones.

The unions did gain members during this period, and increasing union membership in an open shop is a good thing. But the additional enrollment was a consequence of the shop floor organizing carried out by the MLP and the workers, and not by the union officers.

### **Pushing the Trade Unions to the left?**

For some left groups, not only did organizing in the workplace equal trade union work, but the whole point of trade union work was to take over the union local, or in some cases, to push the union to the left. Now, moving the union to the left would certainly be a good thing, but in practice it did not happen. In this article I don’t want to debate if such a thing is possible. I do want to state that the MLP believed that moving the unions to the left, or transforming them into true fighting organizations for the working class, would require at the very least a huge upsurge in the workers’ movement and probably a revolutionary crisis. Whether the MLP was right or not on this point, it correctly observed that nearly all the groups that organized to “push the unions to the left” followed very rightist policies in regard to the labor bureaucrats. Since these trade union bureaucrats really don’t move much in any direction, especially to the left, the practical politics of this tactic was accommodation to the Trade union bureaucracy.

The MLP, meanwhile, campaigned for the workers to take action, regardless of whether the union’s leadership

or any section of the Trade union bureaucracy supported rank and file action.

Many activists who were trying to organize a fight in the plant fell into the trap of channeling things through the union apparatus. When they realized the union was not working for the workers, the idea of changing the union, reforming it or radicalizing it came up. Unfortunately, many worker activists burned out trying to reform their unions.

The MLP's idea, and in my experience the correct idea, was to radicalize the rank and file. If this was done, it created possibilities for struggle. Even from the angle of reforming the unions and remaking them as organizations of struggle, setting the rank and file in motion was (and is) the only possibility for moving the union to the left!

In the MLP's view, the working class needed trade unions that were real fighting organizations. It had no specific plan for creating them -- mass takeovers of the existing unions, dual unions, or entirely new unions were all considered possibilities -- but it believed totally that it would depend on the mass motion of the rank and file led by a core of radical working class activists who broke from the old politics of the trade union bureaucracy.

#### **Fixations on trade unions and trade union forms**

In the US left, Marxists often seem preoccupied with developing trade unions and concentrating on trade union forms. There are several problems with this.

First, the point of organizing in the workplace is not just to fight in that workplace. Revolutionaries must organize workers for a political revolution to overthrow capitalism, something that is not a trade union endeavor. Workplace organization is useful for mobilizing workers for political activities outside of the plant. In fact the experience of the MLP was that a "pro-party trend" among the workers only developed when workers were brought out to demonstrations and movement activities unrelated to their work. Yet trade unions, especially American trade unions, will not normally participate in oppositional movement politics and usually discourage their membership from doing so.<sup>3</sup> At times mass pressure from the rank and file will lead the union leaders to support *some* limited mass actions or to organize demonstrations themselves. The typical actions endorsed or organized by the AFL-CIO wind up becoming "vote for the Democrats" rallies, no matter how radical they seemed at the outset.

This brings us to the second reason: the trade unions

in the US have really lousy rightist politics. There are a great many shades of this rightism, but the predominant politics of American trade unions result in capitulation to the employers. This has been true throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Even if activists consistently and correctly oppose the pro-capitalist politics of the union leadership, their work will always have very limited results. More likely, revolutionaries with a focus on trade union politics will get stuck organizing on economic issues defined by the trade union. These may be very important issues at certain times, but without bringing revolutionary politics into the workplaces, and without bringing the workers out into the general political motion in society, the politics in the plant will be as drab and lifeless as the typical union meeting.

Third, the trade union leaderships often squash the motion of the workers, this is a consequence of their politics.

The Hormel strike in the 1980s is a graphic example of union bureaucrat treachery against the rank and file of their own union. But in addition to these blatant examples, there is the everyday reality of the union leader's refrain: "Cool down now, just file a grievance and settle it through channels, we don't need to get riled up." In every plant that I have worked in, motion from the rank and file generated a fear response from union officers. Never did I see the union seize the opportunity to develop opposition to the company. Rather, I saw the union throw cold water on the workers. The leaflets of the MLP are rich in details of numerous cases where the trade union officials suppressed the motion of the workers, often with disastrous results.

If we had had to wait for the union before fighting, the MLP would have had no success in organizing workers. Our experience is that we were able to take root when we were willing to act without or even against the union.

Fourth, what if there is no union in the workplace? Following the logic that organizing in the workplace equals work in the trade union, your task would have to be to build a union. But that may not be feasible or, even if feasible, not desirable at a given time.

Organizing a union is difficult and may consume all the energies of the activists working inside the plant and out. It might be better to be "a propaganda group" in such an instance, organizing studygroups for Marxist-Leninist education, for example.

Many experienced activists know that not all places are organizable. One must make a decision to leave such a place or to stay and organize what is possible.

For "agitation," it will be better in some cases to concentrate on organizing politically conscious workers into political activities outside of work (Pro-Choice actions or anti-war demonstrations or even actions at other workplaces) before attempting an organizing drive.

Organizing a union may be too big a step for workers at the time. There are lower forms of organization and many small ways to fight the bosses before winning union recognition. These small steps teach the workers how to fight and how to organize. Completing a series of such small steps may be critical to the success of a future organizing drive.

However, to do these things, one must have an orientation to mobilize the rank and file.

### **Opportunism in defense of the union bureaucracy.**

Yet for some left trends the idea of acting without the union is heresy. Several Trotskyist trends (the Spartacist League is a prime example), believe that the workers should focus on getting the union to act in the workers' interest. Their thinking is that the trade unions are truly the workers' organizations and that they must have the support of the union leadership. The MLP on the other hand, felt the pro-capitalist unions were not the property of the workers and did not act in their class interests.

While there is nothing wrong with asking the union to do the right thing, it is absurd to make union endorsements a goal for workers' actions. In some cases the Sparts took this to the most ridiculous conclusions, applauding corrupt union officials for endorsing their proposals, as if such endorsement was a real victory.

No, focusing this way on the bureaucrats teaches precisely the wrong lesson: that we actually do need some condescending saviors. The MLP believed that the workers have to take action on their own behalf, especially if "their" union is acting against their interests.

Others, following the logic that the bureaucrats are not likely to change, focus on taking over the union leadership. This logic has a powerful hold on worker activists who see the union as the only organization that the workers have. If this is true, then yes, you must get the union to act, for what else is there and what else could there be?

The truth is that trade unions are not all there is to fighting the bosses. Literature distribution networks, phone trees and study groups are forms of organization that can carry out actions like petition campaigns, confront-the-foreman meetings, unannounced slowdowns and other informal work actions.

In Part II of this article, which will appear in the next

issue of *CWVTJ*, we will discuss some of the specifics of how the MLP organized on the shop floor, especially the forms of organization that we used to fight back, with or without a union. ◇

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### **Notes**

(1) The MLP didn't discuss its factory organizing nor its overall strategy in terms of "agitation group" vs. "propaganda group" as some (especially Trotskyist) organizations do. The MLP saw itself as many things and sometimes as contradictory things: a small theoretical group fighting revisionism and opportunism, but also an activist group with influence in national strikes and mass movements; the core of what will become a new mass revolutionary political party, but also The Party of the U.S. proletariat and an international leader in communist theory; and many other things.

In hindsight, I believe the MLP lacked for discussion on what it was and what it should be. For example, the consequence of winning union elections was considered by Party from the unit up to the Central Committee. They had to face the immediate question of running for office or not, calculating beforehand how much of a drain this would be on the unit organizing at that workplace, and on the other party bodies overseeing their work. Yet it did not make the connection to the more general question of how much of an activist group it should be versus how much of a theoretical group. Repeatedly the problem arose in MLP cells and higher committees that our work was spread out on too many fronts, "overextension" or "overelaboration" it was called in MLP documents. Comrades were admonished repeatedly to "concentrate the work," to pick a smaller area and focus on it, to pick just one place and concentrate it, and so forth. This was and is sound organizational advice, but it did not address the root cause of overextension. In my opinion, the MLP tried to do too much and tried to be too much. This not only led to the burnout of some comrades, it also led to the development of an internal culture that facilitated overextension and may have blocked the MLP's leadership from even considering the root cause, let alone fixing it.

(2) To be published in a future edition of this journal.

(3) Witness the total absence of union support at the 10/31/98 rally against the murder of Dr. Slepian in Buffalo. See page 40 of this journal.