

On the Role of the Party

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WHAT IS THE ANSWER for the Marxist Left in the United States? Some say what is needed is an organization without a "past." Some argue that what is needed is a legal organization. Some say we need an organization firmly based on the principles of Marxism-Leninism. Some say let us continue as of old with a few changes. Some cry that the Communist Party should dissolve and clear the way for a new organization. Still others say that what we need is a mass party of Socialism.

Let us instead take a look at the American people. Where is America going? What are the trends and developments in the various groups and classes in this country? The American Left must determine its role and forms of organization by the class and political developments in this nation and not on the subjective opinions and wishes of individuals and groups of the Left.

Our organizational forms and program must be conditioned in a large part by the following facts of life: The American working class, with its allies, constitute the only force that can establish Socialism in this nation. It is they, and not a Marxist organization, that will effect a transformation of the social system. Thus the Marxist organization must so mold itself as to be a service organization to

the working class. It dare not fashion itself in any way that would separate it from the working class nor adopt concepts that its actions can be a substitute for those of the working class.

Our organization, its forms, tactics, and program must be conditioned by the class, political and economic developments of this nation. The United States is not Russia. Our working class is not the French, German, or any other working class. It is a class that has and will have its own path of development. Our organization, or any other Marxist organization that wishes to make a contribution, can not have as its starting point only what it thinks must be done. It cannot hope that some day the working class will wake up to how right the organization has been. In short, our organizational forms, tactics, and program must be such as to enable us to "get with the working class," to make it possible for us to become part of the historic forward movement of the working class and through such a relationship lend consciousness of direction to the working-class movement.

As a rule, all growing things, including classes, go through stages. Political and economic events can cause stages to be speeded up, skipped or retarded. Stages are not uniform, or necessarily similar in all countries; on

the contrary, the particular national developments will effect the nature of the stages of the classes in each country. Nor are stages separated one from another by Chinese walls; on the contrary, they grow one within the other, and the relationship of one to another is conditioned by the political and economic events. Thus, to judge the growth of the American working class we must compare where it now stands with where it has come from. Seeing it in this light, and adding to this a concrete examination of the various trends in the class, we might be able to determine which possible positive steps it could take. Such knowledge would help us become a factor in the achievement of these forward steps.

Historically the greatest lack of the American working class has been unity. It has been a class divided against itself. Immigrant versus earlier arrival, skilled against unskilled (earlier craft unions helped prevent organization of unskilled in exchange for concessions), minorities against native born, and minority against minority, Negro divided from white, industrial unions apart from the craft unions, etc. The American working class, almost one hundred years after the Civil War, had not yet achieved the most elementary form of class organization, that is a single trade-union organization that encompassed the majority, and the most decisive sections of the class. This lack contributed to, and was affected by, the failure of any Marxist group to gain a permanent foothold within the working class movement. A class as divided as the U.S. working class, has been a class without the ability to function for its own interests with

any degree of real consciousness.

Has this character of the American working class been altered? We have heard a lot of loose talk about the impact of prosperity on the American working class. Let us see what the facts show.

In 1939 there were only 6,500,000 workers organized into trade unions and these were split. In 1946, the year of the Taft-Hartley act, there were 12,960,000. In 1955 this had increased to 17,010,000. In 1956 it was over eighteen million.

The degree of organization of the working class is concealed by the statistical method used by the Department of Labor. Thus, according to their figures organized labor constitutes about 28 per cent of the total working force. Yet, by their definition, "labor force," includes all self-employed, all professionals, all executives, all salaried workers, all people looking for work, etc. Subtract these, which run into the millions and the percentage of organized workers rises considerably. The same applies to those who work in small stores, offices, are technical workers, etc., who, although they number millions of workers, do not represent main or decisive sections of the working class.

But of more significance is a comparison of the size of the various unions with the total employed in the corresponding industry*

* In a number of cases more workers are listed in a union than employed in the industry, because the union covers more than that industry. Yet, in other cases, more unions exist in the field than are listed, thus a balance is achieved.

<i>Industry</i>	<i>Workers Employed</i>	<i>Union Membership and Union Affil.</i>	
Primary Metals	1,140,000	United Steel Workers	1,200,000
Transportation Equipment	1,400,000	United Auto Workers	1,239,000
Clothing	1,100,000	All Unions	927,000
Food	1,100,000	All Unions	729,000
Rubber Products	200,000	United Rubber Workers	175,000
Mining	430,000	UMW, Mine & Mill.....	500,000
Construction	2,527,000	AFL Bldg. Tr. Unions....	3,141,000
Transportation	2,800,000	All Unions	2,456,000

Textile, tobacco, chemical and printing, because of conditions in the South, are less organized, yet a total of 901,000 are organized into unions covering these industries. Oil is about two-thirds organized, but scattered into many unions, the largest having over 100,000 workers. A less accurate picture of lumber is available because of overlapping with Carpenters Union.

At this point the skeptic might interrupt us. He might contend that though the number of organized workers has increased, this means very little because, in the main, workers have joined the union only because they had to. What is at stake here is whether or not the consciousness of the working class has increased. Involved is whether or not the increased organizational status of the working class has any chance to become a really permanent feature of American life and, if the working class has achieved an elementary form of class outlook, then more advanced forms of class consciousness become more likely. Again we warn, "more advanced" means in relation to what has been the American workers' outlook and not by comparison with the French or other workers.

Again let us turn to facts. Let us judge the degree of conscious support on the part of the workers by what they did when they had the opportunity, without fear of disclosing their individual position, to accept or reject the Unions. I refer to the Government supervised elections and balloting, conducted in secret, on a number of questions.

Between 1936 and 1954, 11,678,000 votes were cast to determine the question of union representation. Of these 9,198,000 or 78 per cent of the votes cast, were in favor of the unions. From 1948 to 1951, 5,547,000 ballots were cast to determine support or rejection of the union shop. Of these 5,071,000, or 91.4 per cent, were cast in favor of the union shop. From 1944 to 1945 the Smith-Connolly act which ordained government-supervised strike votes, was in existence. Under it 1,926,000 ballots were cast. Despite the existence of a war, 1,593,000, or 82.5 per cent, supported the union recommendation for a strike vote. The legislators had no doubt as to where the support of the workers lay and after one year of operation they repealed the act.

Surveys can be very misleading. To judge their reliability we must examine their content. *Fortune* magazine

conducted a survey some time ago and announced that the results showed that the American worker considers himself part of the middle class and not a worker. Figures don't lie but liars can figure. The question asked by *Fortune* was: Do you consider yourself part of the Upper, Middle, or Lower classes? A majority of workers when confronted with these choices picked the middle class category. However, Richard Centers,* of Princeton University, set out, among other objectives, to determine the validity of the *Fortune* survey. The results of this survey, are quite revealing. Participants in this survey were asked the following question: If you were asked to use one of these four names for your social class, which would you say you belonged in: the middle class, lower class, working class, upper class, don't know, or don't believe in classes? 71 per cent of the skilled, 83 per cent of the semi-skilled, 75 per cent of the unskilled chose the working class. An additional 7 per cent of the unskilled chose lower class. Perhaps more revealing is the fact that not one of the workers in all three categories of skill stated that they did not believe in classes.

But do the workers have any knowledge of what determines a class? When asked, 79 per cent of the workers listed occupation as the main thing which determined which class you are in. When asked to list what factors aside from occupation determined a class, 46.2 per cent of all manual workers listed beliefs and outlooks.

True, these statistics by themselves may lead to an over rosy picture. But it does appear to be certain that the American working class has made important strides towards maturing as a

class. What is more important is that the growth of numbers and increased consciousness of the workers, alone, does not tell the whole story. With amalgamation there has come into existence one overall trade union, including at least a million and a half Negroes, that encompasses the most decisive sections of the American working class and has within its fold the majority of non-white collar workers.

In 1952 the Marxist movement became more disoriented than ever when it failed to fully recognize that the objective possibilities for amalgamation had materialized and that substantial trends within labor were inclined in that direction. In 1956, when the Marxist movement must re-chart its course, let it not overlook the objective possibilities that exist for the labor movement nor the trends that exist within the trade unions. Let it recognize that the American working class has at last *achieved an elementary state of organization as a class.*

The question is no longer one of whether the labor movement "ought" to participate in political activity. It is now one of what type of political action it will engage in, and in what directions can this political action lead. The answer to these questions will be influenced largely by the following factors: The strength and status of the trade union movement and its new relationship to the class as a whole; political and economic developments on a national and international scale; the divisions and struggles within the labor movement and in the relations between the labor movement and other segments of the American people; the influence of a conscious or Marxist

* R. H. Centers, *The Psychology of Social Classes* (Princeton University Press, 1949).

sector, or—if such a sector fails to develop a proper relationship to the labor movement then its lack of influence.

Few will deny that labor has gone into politics. What must be noted are the new features emerging around labor's political role. Twice one, does not always equal two. C.O.P.E., the political arm of the merged federation is not simply, the continuation of P.A.C. and L.L.P.E. in a new form. In the previous period the old forms were the political arms of two separate Labor bodies. C.O.P.E., on the other hand, now has the potential of being a political form of at least a decisive section of the class. As the merger proceeds, contradictions, especially between labor and the Democratic Party, achieve a greater potential of exploding. The eighteen million strong labor movement now not only represents the main numerical support for the Democratic Party, but in many instances it represents the most substantial financial support. In some areas, such as Michigan, it is demanding and receiving some payment for this relationship. On one hand labor is moving towards closer ties with the Negro people and on the other, the Negro people are moving further away from the Democratic Party, and thus another set of contradictions is brewing. Both the Labor movement and the huge monopolies of this country are growing at the same time, thus even with the "favorable" economic picture, labor and monopolies are engaging in serious skirmishes. Note the struggles around speed-up, automation and job security questions. The monopolies, because of labor's increased strength, are more and more utilizing their influence in legislative bodies to hamstring Labor. Observe

the rash of states rights and "right-to-work" proposals. Yet the Democratic Party, because of its class and sectional composition, is less and less able to reflect labor's interests on the legislative front.

Labor, of course, does not move as one harmonious grouping in a single direction. On the contrary, many divisions exist within the labor movement over what course should be followed, and the course taken will be determined by the outcome of the contest between the different approaches. What is clear is that the objective status and strength of the organized labor movement is such that its tailing after the Democratic Party kite is presenting it with real problems. The nature of these problems is such that it acts as a stimulus for a more independent political course for labor. Such a course has the potential of reflecting itself, as it has in some cases, within the Democratic Party confines, or, as it has in other instances, in a direction away from the Democratic Party. Let others argue as to whether labor can or cannot take over the Democratic Party. We will simply register the point that a trend towards independent labor political action exists, and if strengthened instead of curtailed or reversed, will lead to a political vehicle, the guts of which will be the mass trade-union movement.

Labor does not develop in a vacuum. The course it takes is determined by its reactions to political and economic events. These events not only provide the content of labor's action, but are also the source of the struggles within the labor movement. We cannot predict the coming political and economic events, though we suspect that they will not all be rosy, but we do contend

coming events will not determine whether or not the powerful trade-union movement will continue to exist. The powerful combination which grew to its present strength despite two wars, a rash of anti-labor legislation, a siege of McCarthyism, etc., will not fold up with the advent of new political and economic happenings. Rather these events will only sharpen the struggle that now exists within the labor movement as to what course it should take.

The outcome of this contest between the various trends in the labor movement cannot be regarded as settled. On one side are those forces, which by their actions and positions, whether it be on one event or many, objectively reflect the interests of the monopolies. All of the political and ideological resources of the monopolies are geared towards strengthening this trend. It represents a dangerous threat to the independent development of the working-class movement. On the other side are those tendencies leading towards independent action. Overall, the factors are favorable for the extension and strengthening of this trend. It is handicapped by the lack of consciousness as to where it is going. Since it is a more spontaneous reaction to events, it is unable as yet to chart a course. Though this trend reflects a reaction of the working-class movement to monopoly domination, it lacks adequate understanding of, and expression against, this main enemy. Thus, each new event has the potential of presenting sources of division and confusion.

This article deliberately singles out the development of the labor movement as its chief concern. Let it be briefly noted that those same forces that are having an impact on the labor

movement are effecting the other important groupings. Thus, movements exist, especially amongst the Negro people, and to a serious extent amongst the farmers and the middle class, that are moving in an anti-monopoly direction. These forces can and do stimulate independent movement in the working class. In the last instances, however, the course taken by these groups will be conditioned by that taken by labor. By themselves, due amongst other things to the whole electoral system here, they are incapable of launching a new electoral alignment. On the other hand, if labor does move it has excellent possibilities of winning these elements to a labor-led electoral alignment. In fact, these groups are more and more turning to labor, as shown in a series of recent events.

No group outside the labor movement can decide by itself that the time is ripe and then go about trying to start such a party, expecting labor and its friends to follow. **Any other organization that tries will get the same rebuff the Wallace Party received from labor, as well as other groups.**

There can be little doubt as to what effect a conscious Marxist sector could have on the working class movement or that such a conscious sector could influence the unfolding of a new electoral alignment involving the non-monopoly sections of our population. **If a Marxist movement were able to become an integral part of the trade-union movement it could help provide that feature most seriously lacking—consciousness of direction.** Such a movement, if it could gain influence amongst the Negro people, farmers, and middle class, could aid in the unfolding of a new political alignment. Therefore the question is not whether

or not such a movement (and movements are built through organizations) is desirable. The lack of such a movement increases the groping for direction on the part of the working class. Thus forward movement is always in jeopardy.

A critical goal of a Marxist movement is to help achieve mass socialist consciousness in this country. In order that it not lose its way, it must always keep this aim in the forefront of its considerations. Mass socialist consciousness, however, does not develop in a vacuum. Individuals, thousands of them, can be convinced of Socialism through education and argumentation. But mass socialist consciousness requires certain objective conditions. The type of struggles within the working class and between the working class and the monopolies, and within the atmosphere of current political events is not such as to create any mass receptiveness for Socialism. More than this, any organization that confines its activities solely or primarily to socialist agitation will be firing over the heads of present movements and thus have no effect either on helping accomplish those steps that will bring the working class closer to Socialism or on developing socialist thinking in this Nation.

In light of the present developments, where the possibility exists for a new electoral alignment the question might be asked as to what effect such a development would have on the ultimate formation of a mass socialist party in this country. This is especially important because so many are today projecting calls for both a mass socialist party and a mass anti-monopoly party simultaneously.

If the working class in this nation succeeded in establishing a political

vehicle of its own, in alliance with other groups, would the mass of workers be ready to leave such a party for one that had a socialist perspective? It is hardly likely that present movements in the working class would first unfold into a political vehicle of a socialist nature. The most that could be expected, short of almost catastrophic events, would be a political movement of an anti-monopoly character and even this level is not a certainty.

Perhaps some ideas about this can be drawn from England. In England, as here, mass trade unions were built without a corresponding workers' political party coming into existence. The trade-union movement in England was tied to the liberal bourgeoisie through the Liberal Party. The first major step in an independent direction was the setting up of what were called Labor Representation Committees. These L. R. committees functioned within the confines of the Liberal Party, but were an arm of the labor movement. Further developments led to a split between Labor and the Liberal Party and the British Labor party was launched. It was not until ten years after this party was formed that it adopted a socialist perspective. Those socialist elements in England that based themselves on the Labor party became merged with it; the others remained small groups outside the labor movement.

The likelihood is not that both a mass socialist party and a mass anti-monopoly party will be built side by side in this country. Rather what is most likely is that either a mass non-monopoly party will come into existence and the struggle for a socialist perspective will be fought out within the party, or events will be such that from the

beginning a new mass party will have a socialist perspective. In light of the lack of a long-standing socialist sector in the labor movement and the nature of the forces in the leadership of the trade-union movement, it does not seem too likely that this latter development will confront us.

Regardless of what political forms working-class action takes, the need is to recognize that the main field from which a mass socialist movement must emerge is the working class. A mass socialist vehicle will not come about because individuals or groups think it is a good idea, but only if the Marxist movement in this country is able to effect a merger of socialist consciousness and the working class movement. Thus the starting point of a Marxist movement must be the present trends, developments, and level of the working class movement. A proper estimate of these will not only enable our movement to find those tactics that will end our isolation, but will enable us to become an effective force in helping the working class understand and organize for Socialism.

What type of organization do we need to fulfill this role?

Our organization will have to discard certain *distorted* concepts of what constitutes a vanguard role. No Marxist organization or combination of Marxist organizations is, or is likely to become in the immediate future, the actual leadership of the working class in the sense that the working class or decisive sections of it look to such an organization for leadership. More than this, the immediate problem for us is not how to lead the working class movement, but how to become connected with it.

We cannot make grandiose proposals

to the working class as to what we think it ought to do. Rather we must determine what actions it is now taking which, if strengthened and given more consciousness, will aid the forward movement towards independent action and socialist consciousness.

As part of these movements we can play a role in sighting the enemy, monopoly. Whether it be in joining the fight to repeal the T.H. act or supporting labor's demand to ban H-bomb tests, or any of the numerous other positive proposals that are raised in the labor movement, the opportunity exists around these questions to expose the role of the monopolies.

In order to play such a role it is necessary for the Party to make its own estimates as to what are the possible goals for the workers in the various areas and for the movement as a whole. In this sense it is a vanguard, for it is conscious of the objective process. Yet in the main, what steps the working class will take, at least for the coming period, will not be under the leadership of the Communists, so in the sense of actual physical leadership we will not be the vanguard of the working class. Perhaps this seems obvious, but examine our activity for at least the past ten years and it will be seen that we violated this understanding again and again. For every course of action proposed by the leadership of the T. U. movement we proposed a counter course and expected the workers to follow us.

In order to play such a role we should project what we think are realistic goals for the trade union movement but not project these as though we, instead of the T. U. movement, could accomplish them. The trade union movement and not the Party

will forge a new political alignment. We can play a modest role in helping the working class achieve consciousness of this need, and become part of the movement to organize it.

Our movement must have as a key task the development of socialist consciousness within the labor and general people's movement. We must see the fight for immediate issues not as a diversion from the task of developing socialist consciousness but as an aid to it. In the past we have not tackled the task of winning support for socialist ideas, but have tended to try to only win support for our organization. Many issues within the labor movement such as guaranteed annual wage, speedup, automation, etc., present opportunities for discussion of socialist ideas, even if they are not labelled as such. As long as one supports the issues, he remains part of the movement and gains an ear. If one presents socialist solutions as alternatives to fighting for these immediate needs he becomes isolated and talks to himself. Our movement must further assume the burden of developing a body of live American socialist literature of a popular type. Socialism is a living dynamic thing and can be presented as such.

Our organization must have its own program, not only advocating Socialism but also a substantial section devoted to the improvement of conditions under capitalism. As Socialism is not on the order of the day we must present other alternatives to war and war production. Such a program must be directed towards winning anti-mon-

opoly elements by its positive proposals and not just rely, as the Draft does, on proposals to curb the monopolies. Such a program must include the fight for full equality for the Negro people. Such a program must include the fight for peace and peaceful co-existence without fostering illusions that either will come about or be maintained without struggle.

There are many questions one could go into, such as critical relations with other Parties, forms of organization, etc. These have been adequately dealt with by numerous participants in the discussion.

To the extent the Communist Party is able to build itself, and plays a role in developing socialist consciousness in this country, to that extent it will increase its ability to directly win the support of the workers as an organization. To be effective in these objectives it must become, through its members, part of the labor and people's movement. In the last analysis one is able to lead only according to his strength, in terms of members and those influenced. Thus, the question of "vanguard" will ultimately be resolved, not by opinions as to what ought or ought not be the case, but by unfolding events. As long as the Communist Party bases itself on the working class, sees its role as one of a service organization to the working class and the people's movement, as long as it never attempts to substitute its actions for those of the working class, it will move in the direction of becoming a force in the working class movement.