

THE
LABOR PARTY
QUESTION

RESOLUTIONS OF
1938 AND 1944 ON
THE RELATIONSHIP
OF THE MARXISTS
TO THE MOVEMENT
FOR A LABOR PARTY

15¢

[1946]

PUBLISHED BY NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL DEPT.

WORKERS PARTY OF U.S.A.

675

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Introduction	1
1938 -	
The Majority Resolution - For a Labor Party	1
The Minority Resolution - Against a Labor Party (By Hal Draper).....	4
1944 -	
The Struggle for an Independent Labor Party in the U.S. (Adopted by the Party Convention)	11
Minority Resolution, - Against a Labor Party (By Hal Draper)	16

INTRODUCTION

The vast gap between the advanced stage of development of American economy and the political backwardness of the American working class has long been the outstanding, over-all contradiction that fairly leaps to the eye of the Marxist observer of the American scene.

On the Continent, the appearance of the modern labor movement was from its outset a politically independent movement in the form of the Social Democratic parties. In England, the trade unions existed on a narrow craft basis for decades before the appearance of the modern industrial organizations at the turn of the century. These, however, brought in their wake almost immediately the organization of the Labor Party.

The persistent failure of the American labor movement to produce a party of its own, despite many indications in that direction at various times, remains a challenge to the Marxists' ability, both as historical and theoretical analysts and as political strategists. Out of this problem has been born the controversy over the attitude of the Marxists toward the formation of a Labor Party, i.e. a party formed on the basis of the existing economic organizations of the working class.

In the period before World War I, the Marxists in the Socialist Party, then having a membership of some 100,000, viewed any Labor Party tendencies as a rival to their party and an obstacle to the development of a socialist consciousness among the workers. With the split in the Socialist movement at the end of the war and the decline in influence of the Socialist Party, a tremendous wave of pro-Labor Party sentiment developed in the trade unions under the influence of progressives like Mockels and Fitzpatrick of the Chicago Federation of Labor and many Socialist trade unionists. This movement posed many complicated problems for the young Communist Party, just emerging from its struggle against ultra-leftism and "undergroundism". Under the guidance of the now notorious John Pepper, representative of the Comintern in this country, the Communist Party was taken through a series of hair-raising twists and turns in an attempt to place the party at the head of the Labor Party movement. The maneuvers of Pepper resulted in landing the party in an opportunist mire from which only the drastic intervention of the Communist International could extricate it. The "Pepper" experiments in Labor Partyism left a bad taste in the mouths of all Marxists which colored their judgment of the Labor Party question as a whole.

The Left Opposition (Trotskyists) were organized in 1929 on a program that included opposition to the slogan for a Labor Party. The moribund state in which the trade unions had descended following the immediate post-war period and their further decline with the beginning of the depression, gave good reason to believe that the American working class would go through a tempestuous political development which would lead directly to the creation of a mass revolutionary party. When the Trotskyists gave up the Communist International as hopelessly degenerated and called for the creation of new revolutionary parties, they took to the tactic of entering the Socialist Party to fuse with its sizable left wing. Their view of the Labor Party remained unchanged. The perspective was still for a rapid politicalization of the masses outside of the trade union movement which would link up with the creation of the new revolutionary party.

However, two events occurred which required that the revolutionary Marxists

1938: THE PARTY ADOPTS ITS PRESENT POSITION (FOR A LABOR PARTY)

(Following are two documents from the 1938 discussion, in which the Party adopted its present pro-Labor Party position. The first is the resolution of the National Committee Majority, which was adopted by a referendum vote of the party; followed by the Minority resolution which sought to maintain the existing policy. The discussion in the Party which preceded the vote on these two resolutions took place not only in the branches but also in the public press. In particular the New International carried both sides.)

THE MAJORITY RESOLUTION -- FOR A LABOR PARTY

The decline of American capitalism and the social crisis ensuing therefrom have already called forth the greatest trade-union organizing campaign in American history, which brought with it a wave of strike struggles unprecedented in scope and revolutionary implications (the sit-down strikes). At the same time the experiences and results of these herculean efforts of the American proletariat have demonstrated the inadequacy of the purely economic struggle to solve even the most pressing immediate problems of the workers. The precipitous decline in economy, as a result of the new crisis, adds new millions to the ranks of the unemployed, cancels out the gains of the strike victories and even threatens the existence of the newly built trade unions. Instinctively sensing the inadequacy of trade-unionism alone under these circumstances, the workers have begun to turn in million-masses toward political action. The further development of the crisis is certain to strengthen this tendency.

The organized participation of the workers in politics under the aegis of Labor's Non-Partisan League represents a profound departure from the old Gompers school of labor politics, although on the surface the two may appear to be identical. In the past the labor bureaucracy confined itself to "endorsing" this or that "friend of labor" on the capitalist party tickets. In the 1936 presidential elections, and in virtually all municipal and state elections since, we have seen for the first time a systematic and increasingly determined effort to organize and mobilize the political strength of the workers as a single unit. This new movement, represented by the L.N.P.L., must be characterized as a stage in the development of the labor movement from complete subservience to the political parties of big capital to an independent party of the workers.

The fact that the movement as yet remains within the formal framework of the Democratic Party is in part due to the conscious restrictions placed upon it by the bureaucracy and in part to the as-yet unclear aims of the masses. On the other hand, the increasing aggressiveness of this movement on the political field, and its mounting demands for more concessions and representation for labor -- an attitude which has already impelled the workers in important local instances to put up independent or semi-independent tickets -- testify to the profound impulse of the masses of workers toward completely independent

reexamining their position on the Labor Party question. The first was the organization of the CIO. This resulted in the appearance, almost overnight, of militant, industrial unions, based on the mass production industries, embracing millions of members and with a political interest beyond any known in the AFL. The second was the expulsion of the Trotskyists from the Socialist Party without the prospect of achieving in the foreseeable future a sufficiently large mass base for their own party to channelize the politicalization of the workers in a revolutionary party.

With the organization of the Trotskyists in the Socialist Workers Party in 1938, the Labor Party question came up for reconsideration from the angle of our relations to the American Labor Party that had been formed under the leadership of the needle trades unions in New York City and of our relations to the national CIO political movement in support of the New Deal, then known as Labor's Non-Partisan League. The reappearance of the Labor Party question coincided with the discussions on the transitional program initiated in our ranks by Comrade Trotsky.

Trotsky posed the Labor Party question in an entirely new light for our movement. The old argument proceeded from the assumption that the Labor Party would be a reformist party and that therefore a slogan for the Labor Party had to be a slogan for a reformist Labor Party. Trotsky riddled this concept by linking the slogan for a Labor Party with our transitional program. He pointed out that revolutionists who call for the workers to create a party of their own also advance a program for that party. The revolutionists, therefore, take no responsibility for a Labor Party other than one that bases itself upon their program. It was this concept of the slogan for the creation of a Labor Party that was proposed to our party and adopted, by referendum vote, in 1938.

The opposition to the Labor Party slogan was led by Comrade Draper, who offered a counter resolution for the continuation of the old position of opposition to the Labor Party slogan. The majority resolution was adopted by an overwhelming vote.

When the Socialist Workers Party split in 1940 and the Workers Party was formed, the latter based itself upon the Labor Party resolution of 1938. This remained the guide to our activities on this question until 1944 when the question was again brought before the party by Comrade Draper. The 1944 convention adopted a resolution reaffirming our support of the Labor Party slogan.

This collection of documents on the question contains the Majority and the Draper resolutions both for the 1938 referendum and for the 1944 convention. We commend these documents to the close study of all party members and students of the American labor movement as an introduction to one of the crucial political questions facing the Marxists in the United States.

Ernest Erber
National Educational Director

political action. This impulse is progressive and must consciously and deliberately be aided at every step by the Socialist Workers Party.

Parallel with the developing sentiment for an independent party of the workers, and in large measure interfused with it, there is a powerful trend in the direction of a new bourgeois liberal party designed to include and swallow up the incipient movement of the workers for independent labor political action. Under further pressure of the social crisis this trend can and most likely will also gain strength, the present Democratic Party may be split wide open and a new party of the democratic bourgeois front emerge, with the labor bureaucracy occupying a prominent though politically subordinate place. Against such a development, as against the present attempts of the bureaucracy to subordinate the workers to the Democratic Party, we counterpose the slogan of independent labor political action through a labor party.

At the time of our national convention [Dec. 31, 1937], we took insufficient account of the new developments in the labor movement, especially in their political aspects, and fell into the error of repeating abstract formulas on the question of the labor party which, in the light of great new developments, had become obsolete. It is necessary now to reconsider the question and to make a radical change in our tactics in regard to the developing labor party movement. Over a period of years we have discussed and debated this question with the opportunists only in the abstract. That could not be otherwise, because neither a labor party nor a formidable movement for its creation was anywhere to be seen. In these discussions we saw only two aspects of the question -- a labor party which did not exist in reality, but which the opportunists sought to suck out of their fingers, or a possible fully developed labor party some time in the future. We now have to gear our practical activity toward a third and hitherto insufficiently appreciated aspect of the question -- namely, a powerful mass movement in the direction of the labor party which has not yet taken a clearly defined shape. We have always said that, confronted with a fully developed labor party, based on the trade unions, we would take a positive attitude toward it and most likely participate in it. We are now confronted with the necessity of concretizing this general point of view and of taking a direct part in the present developing movement for a labor party and of working with all our strength to push it on the road of independence.

The question of the attitude toward an existing labor party has never been a question of principle for revolutionary Marxists. No more should our attitude toward a genuine mass movement for a labor party be so considered. In our tactics we have always taken our point of departure from the concrete political situation and the tendencies of its development. Several years ago, before the crisis of 1929 and even later, until the appearance of the CIO, we could have hoped that the revolutionary, that is, the Bolshevik party would develop in the United States parallel to the radicalization of the working class and succeed eventually in becoming the head of it. Under these conditions it would have been absurd to occupy oneself with abstract propaganda in favor of an unheralded "Labor Party".

The situation since that time, however, has radically changed and it would be inexcusable to close our eyes to it. The powerfully developing trade unions under the conditions of a deepening crisis of capitalism will project themselves all the more irresistibly upon the road of political struggle and upon the road of crystallization into a labor party.

If the official leaders of the trade unions in spite of the imperious voice of the situation and the growing pressure of the masses preserve a reserved position on the question of a labor party, it is precisely because the