

Party Trade Union Work

By Wm. Z. Foster

ON many different occasions the Communist International, in its various communications to our party, has stressed the necessity of our devoting more attention to the trade union work. In the decision of the Enlarged Executive Committee on the American question, it says:

"In America the regular work of party members in the trade unions must be considered now as the fundamental work on which depends the success of the party in most of the other fields, and especially the struggle for a Labor Party. Therefore, any tendency to neglect or minimize the importance of this work must be energetically combated."

THE Comintern found it so necessary to stimulate the Workers Party on the question of Communist work in the trade unions, that it, in conjunction with the Profintern, has addressed a joint letter to our party on this general subject. This letter bristles with instructions to devote more and more attention to activity in the mass economic organizations of the workers. It says:

"It is of extreme importance to the life and growth of the Workers Party that its members as a whole realize better the necessity of more intensive work in the trade unions. The labor unions are the basic mass organizations of the workers. They wage war against the employers on one of the most important sectors of the front of the class struggle. The capture of the leadership of the labor union masses in their struggle is necessary not only for the strengthening of the Workers Party at the present time but also for the ultimate victory of the revolutionary struggle. The capture of the labor unions is our first and foremost task."

And again:

"The Party must use disciplinary measures to compel its members to join the labor unions and to become active in them. It must be firmly fixed in the mind of every party member

that no worker in an industrial country like America can be a real Communist unless he is an active labor unionist. The party must take a determined stand against any sign of slackness in labor union activity. The work in the labor unions must be regarded as the basis which will determine the success of the party in most other spheres of work."

Why all this repeated insistence by the Communist International for increased activity by the Workers Party in the trade unions? The answer is found in the facts that only about one-third of our party members are at the same time members of the trade unions, and of this trade union membership only a very small portion are really active in the trade unions. That is to say, the Workers Party is doing only a fraction of the work that it should in the trade unions, and this fact is well known to the Comintern, which is determined to correct the situation, and to throw all available forces of our party into this basic work.

It is one of the greatest errors of the Central Executive Committee minority group that they do not take to heart these repeated instructions from the Comintern on the question of trade union work, and join wholeheartedly with the Central Executive Committee in a campaign to improve the situation in this vital respect. This is due to a fundamental lack of appreciation of the importance of work in the proletarian mass economic organizations. One of the most serious weaknesses of the minority as a whole is its underestimation of party work in trade unions.

THIS underestimation and lack of understanding of trade union work has long characterized the minority leadership and has manifested itself in various ways. When the minority group controlled the Central Executive Committee, and before the present factional situation developed, the indifference of this group towards trade union work showed itself by surren-

dering this activity almost entirely into the hands of those who now make up the majority of the Central Executive Committee. From the foundation of the Workers Party, and during the last months of the underground party, the Pepper-Ruthenberg group left the working out and application of trade union policies almost completely in our hands. The objective situation was highly favorable, with the workers then engaged in the greatest series of strikes in American history. Our campaigns prospered and the Trade Union Educational League made rapid headway. It immediately became the leader of the whole left wing in the trade union movement.

The Pepper-Ruthenberg group gave this work their blessing from afar. They were uncritical, usually adopting unanimously without discussion all the propositions of the Industrial Department. Yes, despite this policy of non-participation in trade union work, we found the minority delegation at Moscow during the last hearing on the American question graciously taking the credit for all the work that was done. They declared that the party work was highly effective in the trade unions and then took to themselves the full credit for it simply because it was performed when they were in the majority in the party. But the truth is that the only real credit they can claim, if credit is due for such, is for not hindering the work at that epoch. They had almost nothing to do with its actual performance.

AFTER the dispute in the Central Executive Committee in August, 1923, regarding the Federated Farmer Labor Party policy, which was the beginning of the present factional situation, the weakness of the minority on trade union work manifested itself in new forms. For one thing, the minority found it necessary to have a trade union policy. No longer could it surrender completely this important branch of party work to our group. The minority then began to dabble in mapping out trade union policies. The

first fruits of this were presented to the last convention of the party in the form of an industrial program. The outstanding features of this program were proposals to drop the slogans of amalgamation and organize the unorganized. On the question of amalgamation, the minority program said:

"Neither the workers of the unorganized industries nor the hundreds of thousands of organized workers are interested in any organizational improvement of the existing craft unions. Our vigorous campaign for amalgamation was in place for the period of prosperity and it helped to stir up great sections of organized labor."

To this mistaken proposal of dropping the campaign to consolidate the unions, the minority added the equally serious error of proposing to discontinue our active work for the organization of the unorganized. They declared that our slogan, "Organize the Unorganized", "was a proper slogan during a period of complete employment, increase in wages, and decrease in hours." As a substitute for these two basic campaigns the minority proposed to center the industrial work around the organization of the unemployed, altho unemployment had manifestly not taken on a sufficiently mass character to make this program practicable. Since the party convention the efforts of the minority to develop a trade union program have been marked by the most serious opportunistic deviations, which will be discussed in a later article.

AFTER the factional situation developed the minority's minimizing of trade union work showed itself in a tendency to attack and belittle the comrades and organizations engaged in activities in the trade unions. The August Thesis of 1923 made a long attack upon the party members who were active in the trade union movement. This lead has since been followed, with the result that in large sections of the party the feeling has been developed that in some way or other work in the trade unions is not vital and that party members who take the lead in that work are not

Communists in the full sense of the word. The impression has been created that trade union work, as such, is to some degree syndicalistic. Many comrades seem to take a sort of pride in the fact that they play no part in the struggles of the trade union organizations.

As for the Trade Union Educational League, it has been singled out for attack. Campaigns have been openly carried on against it by responsible party workers. In view of the difficult situation that the league has been working under, with the right-wing bureaucracy shooting into it from all sides, such opposition from within our ranks has been particularly disastrous. Instead of correcting the glaring weakness of our Party's work in the trade unions, the policy of the minority tends only to increase it and to make the situation worse.

In the long dispute that has continued in the party since 1923, the question of the character of our trade union work and the emphasis to be placed on this branch of our activity, has been an underlying issue of basic character, even tho the discussion has not turned so directly on this point. In the Party Commission the two groups came to theoretical agreement regarding our tasks in the trade unions. When they accomplish this in the execution of the practical work in these organizations, then the party will be far along on the way to unity.

BUT how can this understanding be brought about? Certainly not by the majority group adopting the minority attitude towards work in the trade unions. There is only one solution to the problem. This is by the minority's fully and freely accepting the Comintern's position that the work in the trade unions is a vital and fundamental task of the party, and then by giving their active cooperation and participation in this work. With this accomplished, the Bolshevikization of our party will proceed apace in all its aspects, and the party will rapidly assume a position of far greater power and influence in the labor movement as a whole.