

On the labor front Are Unions 'Weapons of Revolution'?

Recent columns in this section have dealt with the necessity for communists to be active in trade unions on a revolutionary, not reformist, basis. What precisely does this mean in every-day struggle? Are unions "weapons of revolution" as a recent C-D headline stated? If so, in what sense? If not, why not? A letter in this issue criticizes that headline and the editorial on the Texas farmworker struggle for placing too much stress on exposing the union sellout and on formulating a better union program, with not enough attention to the primary factor—the Party's program for building revolution through that struggle.

Recently C-D ran an editorial (Jan. 30) which included the following: "... We enter these (union and contract) struggles in a fighting mood, battling not only for higher wages, better conditions and a more democratic union but primarily to point out WHY we are forced to fight for every crumb, WHY we are forced to strike to have any chance of getting anything, WHY these labor fakers are on our backs. All of these "whys" stem from the nature of the capitalist system, a society in which a small group of bosses own and control everything (including the government) and the overwhelming majority are workers who produce everything and barely keep our heads above water, if that.

So a communist fraction program in a union election becomes: (1) discussing with workers in our shop the real demands we have and why we have our backs to the wall; (2) running candidates around specific demands PLUS the need to dump the system; (3) if not running candidates, exposing the fakers who are running. . . .

Communists . . . should organize campaigns, strikes for 30 hours work for 30 hours pay, against the rulers' racist poison which destroys working-class unity and reaps super-profits for the bosses, against the oppression of women workers—all this in order to tie these problems to the real solution: Socialism and workers' power. . . .

"By entering these contract and union struggles full blast and exposing how capitalism ties us in knots, we can build a revolutionary party and a revolutionary movement that has the power to overthrow capitalism. . . ."

Two situations in which PLP members are trying to give this kind of leadership have been reported recently in C-D: one among Texas farmworkers and another in the Colgate plant in Oakland, Calif. In Texas, a number of newly-recruited Party members have led a fight which has ousted the sellout Orendain from leadership of the Texas Farmworkers Union (TFW) and has led the workers to choose some Party members to be on the union's executive board. A struggle is going on between these Party-led forces and the Chavez gang for leadership of this struggle. In the course of all this, many farm-

workers joined PLP, the circulation of C-D (and therefore the spread of communist ideas) rose sharply, and great momentum has been given to the organization of a May Day march in the Rio Grande Valley, led by the Party around its ideas.

Would the Party's ideology and membership have been built if we had absented ourselves from this class struggle? Probably not. Has our participation in this struggle led automatically to the building of revolutionary ideas and of PLP? Definitely not. These ideas were brought from outside the immediate reform struggle, and—in the case of May Day—occurred alongside it. At the same time, these communist ideas helped to raise the level of the struggle and turn it more into a class struggle, against the growers (and their labor lieutenants) as part of a CLASS, not as a group of nasty individuals who are mean to workers.

In the Colgate plant, as C-D reported, the Party reacted to the bosses' attack on the workers (accusing workers of "stealing" equipment and demanding the right to inspect lunchboxes on leaving the job) by pointing out that the real stealing in this plant involves

therefore, (3) the union should endorse a PLP demonstration against apartheid and fascism in South Africa as the best expression of how we can strengthen ourselves, not only in the contract fight but in the development of an international working class movement led by communist ideas. The workers at the union meeting voted to support the PLP action.

This has all culminated in the workers first proposing that the PLP'er run for shop steward and then electing him by a decisive margin.

In Texas and at Colgate, now that we have been chosen for union positions, what role do we play as revolutionaries? It would appear that, to continue in a line of revolutionary, not reformist, struggle, we would have to act in such a way that the class enemy would move for our immediate ouster from these positions. That is, a shop steward would have to tie every single grievance to how capitalism causes that grievance, and therefore why the existence of that grievance proves the need for a revolution and the need to join PLP. No doubt the sellout union leadership, the boss (and even some honest workers) would say,

the working class raises the CLASS struggle of masses of workers—even if they all don't join the Party—closer to the stakes of the seizure of state power. But it is communists who do this, using communist ideas, not simply militant trade unionists using reform-the-system ideas. No, in the sense that unions cannot be revolutionary organizations doing the job of a revolutionary party (as it is put forward by anarchosindicalists). Their goals are reform within capitalism (see previous two columns). If a union, and ALL its members, adopted the goal of revolution, of the seizure of state power from the bosses as a class, and subordinated its central character—reform—it would cease to be a trade union under capitalism but would become part of a revolutionary party.

Why is the question of full-scale participation in trade union struggle by communists so important? For at least two reasons:

(1) If we agree that we cannot absent ourselves from active participation in class struggle, it will lead inevitably to the workers seeing communists as the best, most trusted leaders. They may see this in a reform sense, but they choose communists nevertheless.



The new P.L.P. pamphlet, MARCH ON MAY DAY, is one of the best pieces of communist literature I've read in over 30 years of being active in the communist movement. It's exceptionally well written, clear, logical, persuasive, not clichéish, and above all presents a profound communist view of the capitalist system and the revolutionary road to overthrow it. It's excellent!

I strongly urge every C-D reader to send in \$1 NOW (plus anything extra they can afford) so that tens of thousands more of this pamphlet can be published. Also, if every C-D reader would order 10-20 copies to give to friends, family, and co-workers we would reach more than a quarter of a million workers. This would help to raise the communist consciousness of a significant sector of the working class.

The mass circulation of MARCH ON MAY DAY is a great organizer for building for large May Day demonstrations. It can also become an excellent piece of basic Marxist-Leninist literature for study groups, party fractions and clubs.

Comrades! Friends! Send in your dollars. Order a bunch. Do it NOW! Enclosed is \$10 towards my own order of 25 copies.

—M.S., a NY PLP member

capitalists stealing from workers. Bosses never pay workers wages equal to the value our labor power creates, the source of bosses' profits (surplus value). This was coupled with the demand to refuse lunchbox "inspection."

The next level of struggle occurred at a union meeting in which a Party member linked the contract struggle to U.S. imperialism's exploitation of workers in South Africa. When the union leader warned the workers that not too great a settlement could be expected ("since this plant is just a tiny part of the international conglomerate that owns Colgate" and is therefore expendable), the PLP'er pointed out: (1) that if the bosses, as a class, have an international strategy, so too should the working class have an international strategy; (2) that part of this strategy should be support for rebelling workers suffering fascism in South Africa, where Colgate has a plant and uses racism to reap super-profits and pit these workers against those in the U.S.; and,

"That's not what a shop steward is supposed to do; stick to your job of filing grievances." But if we have run for election on a platform of not merely militantly opposing the boss, but of opposing the capitalist system, then we would point out that this is precisely what we are doing, and that we are fighting for another system—Socialism—which can wipe out the SOURCE of such grievances.

If this ups the ante of class struggle, fine! If it leads to our ouster as shop steward—or, in Texas, ouster from the executive board—the barometer of winning or losing will not become whether we maintained the union position, but whether we used that position on behalf of the best class interests of the workers who elected us; that is, whether we recruited workers to revolutionary ideas and impelled some to join PLP.

If we act in this manner, does this make unions "weapons for revolution"? Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that communist leadership which raises political demands of

They therefore propose communists to lead the union, run for shop steward, president, etc. Do we answer, "No, we only fight for revolution and being an official in a trade union under capitalism is, by definition, reformist"?

(2) As capitalism weakens and the ruling class drives for fascism, the trade unions can become a very important force within the working class, either for or against fascism. In pre-Hitler Germany, the Social Democrats (social fascists) controlled the trade union movement. They were in the position to deliver the workers into the arms of the Nazis. Certainly the kind of class collaborationists who run U.S. unions today wouldn't think twice about performing that act of treachery (in the name of "saving democracy" and "defending ourselves against foreigners," no doubt). What role do communists play in this process, a questions growing more immediate by the day?

In our next issue we will discuss these two questions.