
THE HUMAN ELEMENT IN MASS AGITATION

BY WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

[This is the second in Comrade Foster's series of articles on mass organization and struggle. The first article, which appeared in the February issue, dealt with the urgent need for developing a modernized technique of mass organization. Others will follow.—The Editors.]

ONE of the most serious weaknesses of present-day mass agitation in the United States, with which all sections of the democratic front movement are variously afflicted, is its dry, unemotional and hyper-objective character. That is, the educational work among the toilers lacks the human element; it does not sufficiently reflect the actual life of the people. There is too much of a tendency to neglect a vivid presentation of the stark reality that tens of millions of toilers and their families are in bitter want and are actually suffering under existing conditions; too much of a practice to present the class struggle and the exploitation of the workers as abstract questions of statistics and political trends.

Of the several detachments of the democratic front forces the trade unions are perhaps the worst offenders in considering the masses too matter-of-factly, rather as so many statistical units than as exploited and oppressed human beings. Quite gen-

erally, their official journals and other mediums of mass educational work are stifled with dry-as-dust industrial technicalities; and their wage negotiations seldom bring forward the workers themselves to make a real portrayal of actual conditions, but are usually elaborate statistical argumentation, coldly presented by prosperous union officials. (Example: the recent railroad wage negotiations, where not a single worker testified and where the whole business resolved itself into a matter of statistics.) Among the middle-class progressives there is also very largely a rather cold-blooded research approach to the lives and struggles of the masses.

Nor does the Communist Party wholly escape this widespread tendency. We, also, are somewhat inclined to generalize the hardships of the people and to concentrate our attention too closely upon such things as mass trends, statistical quantities, social analyses and general political programs, and often we do this in language that is "Greek" to the workers. True, our speakers and writers deal elaborately with broad questions of unemployment, low rates of wages and relief, the great profits of the capitalists, etc., but too abstractly; seldom do they translate these generalities into vital terms of the an-

guish, poverty and misery that these things actually mean in the life of the masses.

There are exceptions, of course, among liberals, as well as Left elements, to the customary cold-blooded, generalized statement of the bad conditions of the masses and the remedies to be adopted. President Roosevelt, for example, is notably human in his public utterances. Occasionally, also, a progressive or Left-wing writer effectively portrays the hardships of the masses and expresses heartfelt indignation at the barbarities of the present social system. Just now Paul de Kruif is vividly dramatizing in his books the struggle of the masses for life and health, telling us what is actually happening in the medical profession and among the poverty-stricken sick people.

Indeed, the general discussion that has grown up recently around the question of a federal health program has done much to tear aside the curtains of dry statistics and to uncover the horrible and unnecessary sickness among the masses. Heywood Broun is another in whose writings the human element is prominent. Upton Sinclair, continuing his life-long exposure of American capitalism, still brings out literature of this vivid type. Then there are the warm and human writings of Mike Gold and M. J. Olgin. In the past several years, also, there seems to be a growing tendency among younger Left-wing writers to get away from their former mechanical and abstract approach to the masses and to write about how the people really live and struggle. And as for exposures of bad capitalist conditions, the LaFollette

Committee has done a real job by boldly uncovering the labor-spy and strikebreaker evils in all their ugliness.

But the foregoing instances, to which, of course, many more could be added, serve only to emphasize the fact that for the most part, current Left and progressive mass educational work is too cold and impersonal, smacking rather of statistical departments than of the actual life of the people.

Obviously, there are grave dangers in this tendency toward an unemotional, hyper-objective approach to the masses. The toilers see and feel the evils of capitalism primarily in terms of personal privations and miseries in their homes and work places, and unless we are acutely aware of this fact and constantly expose and condemn these evils on this close-up basis we cannot really grasp the needs and moods of the masses, nor can we make these masses clearly understand the connection between their grievances and our political remedies for them. The current depersonalized approach is, therefore, a barrier to establishing the broadest mass contacts. It runs us into the serious danger of exposing the masses to the demagogy of the fascists, who make it their main stock-in-trade to play upon the emotions and miseries of the people.

SOME LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCE

The present-day tendency to adopt an ultra-objective attitude toward the class struggle is out of line with the best traditions of the labor, democratic and revolutionary movements, both here and abroad. The greatest

popular leaders of our whole period have been men and women whose hearts beat in close sympathy with and in deep knowledge of the hardships and tragedies of the people. They not only knew how the capitalist system worked out but also felt a deep and personal hatred toward the oppressors of the people and expressed themselves eloquently accordingly. They understood how to combine theory and human feelings.

Karl Marx, for example, in his monumental theoretical work, *Capital*, exposed at great length the barbarous British capitalist system and the resultant poverty and degradation of the working class. Engels also, notably in his famous book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, did the same. Lenin, especially, besides being profoundly theoretical was warmly human, and his activities and writings expressed the closest contact with the masses and their miseries. And Stalin likewise displays this common characteristic of great revolutionaries; in the midst of the complex theoretical problems which beset him he never fails to stress the necessity of listening closely to what the masses have to say and of reflecting faithfully their grievances. In harmony with all this also is the intense humanness of the Soviet government, with its recognition of toiler heroes of workshop, farm and battlefield, and its airtight fusion at all points with the lives of the masses.

During its earlier stages the broad labor, progressive and revolutionary movement of this country displayed in its mass agitation a greater humanness and close-up reflection of the

hardships of the people than it does now. To realize this we need only recall the moving speeches of Debs and Haywood, the dramatic exposures of the workers' poverty in the I.W.W. Lawrence strike in 1912 and in the A. F. of L. packinghouse movement of 1918, etc., or to look back upon the famous school of "muckrakers"—Steffens, Sinclair, Baker, Myers, Russell and others—who, despite their weaknesses of program and analysis, nevertheless made brilliant and detailed dramatizations of capitalist industrial tyranny and political rottenness.

But in recent years, beginning especially with the Coolidge period, we have had less and less of such emphatic, documented and sympathetic exposure of the people's destitution, the brutalities of capitalist exploitation and the corruption of capitalist politics. More and more the statistical, detached, unemotional method of agitation has come to the fore. We now even hear it said that "It is useless to tell the workers they are exploited and poverty-stricken, because they know it already," and often we find people who look upon the pre-war muckrakers as naive and futile. All this is an erroneous tendency artificially to separate political theory from "human interest," and grossly to belittle the latter.

The great strength of the mass movement of today is its better theoretical understanding. Especially in the case of the Communist Party, which is far more deeply grounded in the works of Marx and Engels than the Socialist Party ever was, in addition to the Communist Party's foundation on the teachings of Lenin and

Stalin. Moreover, under pressure of the capitalist crisis, all other sections of the growing democratic front movement are acquiring a clearer understanding of the workings of the economic and political system under which we live. This is all to the good and enormously important. But it is no reason whatever why the human element should be neglected in our mass work. Nor does the emphasis I place in this article upon the human element tend in the slightest degree to underestimate or play down the profound importance of political theory.

WHAT HAS PRODUCED THE DEPERSONALIZED METHOD?

Before considering what can be done to correct this wrong, hyper-objective tendency, which I have been describing, let us first inquire as to what has brought it about. Here the apologists of capitalism have a ready answer. They assert that if we now seldom make the dramatic exposures of the workers' poverty and bad working situation, or of the financial juggling and government corruption, that we once did, the reason therefore is that capitalism in the intervening years has made great strides in improving the workers' status and its own ethics in industrial and political management. Hence, say the apologists, the sharp and incisive criticisms of yesteryear are no longer possible.

But this explanation does not jibe with reality. True, the labor and progressive forces have, to a certain extent, knocked the rough corners, so to speak, off some of the early, most outrageous abuses of capitalism, *e.g.*, in quite some measure as regards the

brutal open shop, the excessively long work day, the terrible slum conditions, the total absence of social insurance, etc.* It is also true that the capitalists, with a view to shielding themselves from attack, have adopted new techniques of financial thievery and political corruption that lack their one-time barefacedness. Nevertheless, a consideration of the period of the last two decades shows that the sum total of mass misery, exploitation and destitution in the United States has not been diminished, but, on the contrary, greatly increased.

The general effect of labor reforms and also of the hypocritical changes in capitalist methods in lessening some of the more flagrantly brutal features of capitalist exploitation has been to make the robbery of the toilers somewhat more subtle and less brazen and revolting. But the great mass of human suffering, if less dramatic than in earlier days, nevertheless remains and grows. The Roosevelt administration has done much to improve conditions; but it has not been able to overcome the deadly effects of the destructive rule of monopoly capitalism.

Today the workers are getting a

* Capitalism's handling of prostitution is an example of "knocking off the rough corners" without eliminating the basic evil. Thirty years ago in Western cities the red-light districts were so glaring that actually at night the sky was so red that for a distance one might conclude that that end of the town was on fire. This situation tended to dramatize prostitution enormously and the Socialist speakers of the time never tired of assailing it. But gradually capitalism, grown wiser, abolished the old-time spectacular redlight districts, scattering the prostitutes around through hotels and apartments; and many people, not seeing the evil right under their noses, concluded that it had been greatly, if not entirely, wiped out.

smaller share of what they produce than ever before; vast starvation wage areas exist; the insidious speed-up claims more victims now than were ever destroyed by the once almost completely unprotected machinery; the plague of unemployment has become far more widespread and chronic; general housing conditions, in spite of considerable slum clearance, are now worse than ever; the dread specter of economic insecurity has grown and has become a major factor in filling our insane asylums; the farmers are less secure in their incomes and in the ownership of their farms; a great fear of war broods over society, etc., etc.

And that the capitalists have not reformed but have merely changed their technique of financial jugglery and political corruption is evidenced by the mess uncovered in the steady stream of such cases as that of Walker, Manton, Hines, Whitney, Coster (and his higher-ups), etc.

The main reason for the decline of the incisive, close-up and human criticisms of capitalist exploitation and for the growth of more generalized, detached and ultra-objective attitudes is undoubtedly to be found in the fact that as the rough edges were taken off the most brutal aspects of capitalist exploitation and, as hope was developed for further progress in this direction, the labor and progressive movements failed to grasp the fundamental necessity of extending their sharp criticism over to the vast quantity of less spectacular but more deadly misery and destitution that lie behind the deceptive front of capitalist society. There are other reasons for this general development,

such as the fact that the extreme complexity and rapid tempo of development of the present situation put a sort of premium upon all kinds of analyses and statistics, and the further fact that today, more than ever, professional leaders speak for the masses, rather than the masses themselves. But despite these factors, the cause indicated above is, I think, the decisive one.

HUMANIZE THE MASS AGITATION

From the foregoing it should be clear that there is a great need for the forces of the democratic front, the Communist Party included, to humanize their mass educational work, to put a heart into their political theorizing, to give more dramatic expression to the great welter of human misery and suffering in the United States, to speak out in terms of actual human relationships rather than merely in terms of cold, impersonal, political generalities. It is not a question of abandoning the present statistical and broad theoretical presentations—these are the fundamentals of our position and in this regard we have gone far beyond the early movement. But the need is to enrich these presentations by linking them up more directly with the actual lives of the masses.

We must learn afresh how to search out and unveil the grim human tragedies, the blighted homes and ruined hopes behind such broad political generalities as "eleven million workers are unemployed," and "one-third of the nation is ill-fed, ill-clothed, and ill-housed," and "in mass production industries workers are now ready for the scrapheap at 40 years of age." By

the same token, we must also learn better how to translate our economic and political demands into more concrete terms of bread and butter, happier homes and fuller lives for the masses. The democratic front fight for democracy must be more emphatically expressed in human values. We must reach the hearts of the people if we are to reach their minds. To do this it is necessary that more actual workers be trained as leaders, and that our present-day writers, speakers and mass organization officialdom come closer to the life of the people.

It will profit us to think back to the tremendously powerful effects of such intensely human books (despite their political faults) as Blatchford's *Merrie England* and *Not Guilty*, which were flaming exposures of British capitalism; and also to recall that the strongest accounts of the World War, those producing by far the greatest propaganda effects (although sometimes not constructive), were built upon the experiences, sufferings and deaths of individual soldiers or squads of soldiers, such as *Under Fire* by Barbusse; *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Remarque, and *And Quiet Flows the Don* by Sholokhov.

Our job is not to try to revive mechanically the old-time school of muckraking, or to descend to slobber over the woes of the people, or to indulge in a lot of far-fetched and unreal denunciations of capitalism, and especially not in any way to weaken our theoretical, analytical arguments—we must be on guard against all such harmful tendencies. Our task rather is to put more of the stuff of real life into our agitation, developing our exposure of all forms

of capitalist exploitation, rottenness and tyranny on the living basis of present-day conditions. Nor in this educational work shall we forget the trenchant role of humor—for the workers, notwithstanding their many difficulties, retain their sense of humor and can be readily educated through it. If we vitalize our agitational work correctly, our writers will not be long in perceiving that the materials for just as great and human works as Blatchford's *Merrie England*, Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Gorky's *Mother* are lying all around them, awaiting only their attention.

Let me give one simple practical illustration of how mass educational work can be humanized and made more effective. It has to do with an incident that occurred at the National Health Conference held some months ago in Washington. Gathered together were several hundred delegates, nearly all officials of various types of mass organizations. Although the big majority of these delegates were highly sympathetic to the general project of improving the people's health, their argumentation followed pretty much the usual one-stage-removed, generalized, statistical presentation of the need for a national health program. In the midst of this devitalized discussion a delegate from the women's auxiliaries of the C.I.O. steel workers' union rose and said:

"Yesterday, Mr. West of Chicago extended an invitation to the delegates present at the National Health Conference, to visit the American Medical Association office in Chicago to see its accomplishments. I, too, want to extend an invitation to the delegates present here to visit Chicago—but I want to show them another picture. I want to show them a sick Chicago, a Chicago of dirt

and filth and tenements. The people I represent live in this part of Chicago. Many of them have never seen any other part."

The speaker followed this up with a vivid, close-up picture of actual conditions of sickness, suffering and death among the workers in the Chicago slums. Almost every sentence was the story of a personal tragedy. She put the breath of life into the dry discussion of the people's health. Her short and simple talk shocked and stirred the conference. It was in glaring contrast to the cold, impersonal speeches of other delegates; it was the voice of the workers themselves speaking about their actual lives.

To humanize the mass educational work operates to solidify the democratic front. When we more thoroughly expose the privations and exploitation suffered by the workers, we not only develop a better and more sympathetic understanding among the workers themselves (for they do not know each other's troubles as well as we think they do), but we also help them to realize the significance

of our political program and to accept it. It opens their minds to our theoretical arguments. And equally important, a more human presentation of the workers' cause will tend to dispel current illusions among the farmers and middle class that the workers are prosperous. In the same manner, a close-up presentation of the position of the farmers and city middle class, in terms of their real life and not merely of statistics, will awaken the workers' sympathies and cement their alliance with these groups. The more we dramatize—correctly, of course—the hardships and poverty of the people, the more we create a favorable "public opinion" for the people's democratic demands, and the more difficult we make it for reaction to put across its nefarious schemes.

To humanize the mass educational work is a major political necessity for building the growing democratic front. It is no less a basic essential for developing our Party's mass education for socialism.

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