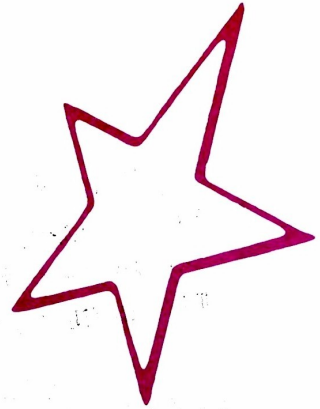


CONVENTION RESOLUTIONS

November 1978

138



LABOR PERSPECTIVES

I. INTRODUCTION

For a decade the IS has been committed to building a rank and file movement in the unions. It was the core of our strategy for building a revolutionary workers party in the U.S. If revolutionary socialists could establish themselves as fighters and leaders in the struggles of the day, they could in the long run, build a revolutionary workers organization out of the best fighters in the rank and file labor movement.

In line with this proposition we watched for signs of an emerging movement as we established our roots in the working class. We thought we saw the beginnings of a mass rank and file upheaval in the early 70's, but it lost its momentum. The IS continued its work in industry and the unions, work which would eventually pay off in establishing many of our cadres as leaders and respected fighters in their plants and locals. But, the level of class struggle was low, the response of the workers to the crisis slow. There were struggles, but they were generally small and localized. For the IS, times were hard. Sticking it out in the working class cost the IS two splits and the loss of some talented cadre. For a period, the political perspectives of the IS seemed up in the air.

Now things are changing for the better. An emerging rank and file movement, mostly taking the form of a fight to reform the unions and make them fighting instruments of the working class once again, is now visible. As yet, it is small, its leaders often inexperienced, its state of organization dangerously low. But it is real, nonetheless.

For us, the first signs of this new movement came with the TDC and then the TDU. Then came the Sadlowski campaign. And most recently the events in the UMWA. We have been participants in, or in close contact with, these and other events. We are now in a position to assess our experience, to examine the forces in society that are molding this new movement, and to point toward the next steps for the I.S. and the union reform movement. This document will attempt to do that.

LABOR PERSPECTIVES RESOLUTION /2

II. TRENDS AFFECTING CONSCIOUSNESS

General Economic Crisis

After three decades of general prosperity and expansion, crisis returned to capitalism on a world scale in the late 1960's. Declining profit rates, slumping productivity and serious recessions meant an end to continuous growth in living standards of organized workers. Inflation lowered real wages, unemployment grew, and employers began to step up resistance to sizeable wage and benefit increases.

The return of economic crisis meant more than this. It forced business to change its habits, created new movements of capital, new attitudes among owners and managers, and therefore new problems for labor and the working class.

Attacks on working conditions in the early 70's led to something of a rebellion (TURF and IBT wildcat, postal wildcat, NY Tel strike, GMAD and other auto strikes were widespread, mine wildcats including the Black Lung Strike). This rebellion ended with the imposition of wage controls, and a brief return to rising real wages in the 1972-3 boom.

The 1974-5 recession, the worst in decades, was a shock for most American workers. But rather than rebellion, its immediate result was gear and caution. The recession allowed--and required--the employers to heighten their offensive. In the long run, though, the recession --and future recessions--will be the experiences which force the working class to organize in its own defense and bring capitalism itself into question.

Trends Undermining Union Power

The crisis sped the movement of capital to the south and southwest, away from areas of union strength. This was not only because of low wages, but also because of the higher productivity that comes with the weakness of union traditions, and the accompanying acceptance of management's right to manage.

The growing trend towards corporate mergers puts more resources into a given employer's hands to resist union demands and to attack labor.

In addition, these mergers are increasingly across industrial lines: a single corporation runs divisions in unrelated fields. Thus, there are many different unions involved, and no union at all in some divisions. This often reduces labor's strength, in effect, to a single plant approach.

The decline of union power in America, now visible to all, is having an important influence on the consciousness of activist unionists. It discredits the union leaders, and points to organizing

LABOR PERSPECTIVES RESOLUTION/3

which has explosive class struggle implications--massive organizing drives will heat up the class struggle and require new methods of struggle. Among the activists and reformers in the unions there is a general and growing awareness of both these facts.

The Rise of The Employers' Offensive

By an employers' offensive we mean an organized effort by employers to change the balance of power and thereby to intensify their normal efforts to raise the rate of exploitation.

From World War II to the end of the 1960's a deal existed between most employers and most union officialdoms, which meant that employers would provide a more or less continuously growing level of income and benefits, and in return the union leaders would guarantee labor peace and give management the right, within certain limits, to control the workforce in such a way as to continually increase productivity.

The employers' offensive usually began as an attempt by management to push this deal to its limits. Although this often led to a wave of wildcats, mentioned above, the labor leaders usually granted the concessions demanded. Although this sometimes meant contractual changes, it was usually a case of the union continuing to give management a free hand, and management increasingly using that free hand.

Through the late 60's and early 70's, the effects of inflation were more visible than the effects of the employers' offensive, and the response of the unions--larger wage packages--was within the bounds of their "deal" with the employers.

But the employers were increasingly unwilling to pay such a high monetary price--which they viewed as one of the causes of inflation--for a free hand at the work place. There was greater resistance to large wage packages, and contracts grew smaller.

The Heritage of the 1960's

The working class began to experience the effects of the economic crisis and the employers' offensive as an era of mass social and political movements drew to a close.

Most active unionists old enough to have lived through the second half of the sixties have a general anti-war outlook, and Vietnam vets even more so. This outlook is not anti-imperialism, but the basis for the development of anti-imperialist consciousness.

The movements of the 60's have had a significant impact on the culture of America and the consciousness of sections of the working class. Blacks, women, and other oppressed groups have far more pride and aggressive consciousness than before. Changes in the objective position of women and minority groups in the work force, combined with what appear to be permanent changes in consciousness mean

they will play a more central role in the development of the reform movements in the unions, the organizing of the unorganized etc. The attitudes of white workers will change because Blacks and women are in a better position to force these changes, and because--in a crisis--no one will be able to go it alone.

The movements of the sixties have changed the rules by which politics are played in the American labor movement.

Nixon-Ford Era

The seventies were a reaction to those same social movements, and consciousness was affected by that reaction, based especially on racism. But today the real threats to the living standards of all workers are becoming more visible. The perception by white workers that Blacks are the main threat to their living standards can be challenged by a perception that the American ruling class is the main threat. Racism remains strong. But among the more active and conscious white union activists the choice between these two perceptions is becoming clearer. And it is these activists, of all races and both sexes, who are becoming the leaders of economic militancy and reform sentiment. Their ideas will influence the ideas of broader sections of the class.

The aftermath of Watergate and the other scandals--CIA, Koreagate, Bert Lance, etc.--means that the rot of the system is visible and the political context of those who are becoming active in the union reform movement.

Conclusions

The American working class entered the second half of the 70's with a series of experiences and changes that play a vital role in the development of genuine class consciousness. America had been defeated in war by a tiny Asian nation and by the opposition of much of the American population. Massive social movements had changed the make-up of a good deal of the workforce and transformed the consciousness of the oppressed section of the working class. A President had been forced to resign in disgrace. There had been wage-price controls and then a jolting recession. The real enemy of the working class, the capitalist class, had launched an offensive against working conditions and even wages and benefits. The brief flirtation of some white workers with the Republican Party had ended as a failure, and many of the reasons for that move to the right began to recede in importance. Forces for unity and resistance were growing, but organizers were needed to make them real. The force that appeared not to have changed was the labor bureaucracy. Clinging to all the old ways, tied to a deal that no longer worked, the American labor leadership faced the second half of the 70's as though nothing had changed, when in fact almost everything but them had changed.

III POST-RECESSION SITUATION

The Declining Labor Movement

Both the proportion and now the absolute size of union membership is declining. Often the situation is worse than the figures show: the old CIO unions have suffered among the worst, and often the key sections of a union's strength have suffered more than peripheral sections.

Employers' Offensive: A New Stage

Taking advantage of these trends, and pushed on by the slow economic recovery, the employers' offensive entered a new phase. While there was still more intensification of attacks on working conditions, there were now two new forms of attack. There was the rise of "give-back" or "take-away" demands-- no longer would each contract automatically bring some improvement to the workers, a central assumption of the post-war co-operation.

Most significant of all, there was the return of union-busting strategies. Generally, the giant capital intensive corporations have not yet attempted to directly wipe out the unions they bargain with. They have upped their attacks, without yet totally breaking the deal with the labor bureaucracy. But it is wrong to think, as much of the American left has, that these corporations prefer unions because the union leadership helps discipline the workforce. They tolerate unionism only so long as the union leadership can deliver productivity growth--the discipline is a means to an end, not the end itself.

Public Sector Crisis

The general crisis of capitalism has produced a fiscal crisis in its public sector. The ruling class views most labor in the public sector, and most of the goods and services produced as unproductive--as waste in the economic sense. The attack on public sector unionism have been among the fiercest and most "advanced" of all.

Response of the Labor Bureaucracy

Seeing these attacks develop throughout industry, the labor bureaucracy was slow to react. Their first "strategy" was a shift away from direct money settlements and towards benefits, in an effort to win things the corporations would not resist too strongly. But as the cost of these benefits (especially medical benefits) rose, the corporations began to resist these as strongly as wage demands.

The next "strategy" of the bureaucracy was a turn to politics-- to win in Congress and from the White House what they couldn't get at the bargaining table. But the capitalists totally out-politicked labor within the Democratic Party. No pressure has been taken off of contract settlements and the bargaining process. Labor's attempts at a new strategy without breaking the old deal had failed.

LABOR PERSPECTIVES RESOLUTION/6

The Rise of the Reform Movement

In the late 60's and early 70's the labor bureaucracy had appeared as a monolith vis-a-vis the rank and file. The reform movements then seemed clear confrontations of the rank and file against bureaucrats.

The movement actually arising is not so simple. Generally it is a movement of union activists, both rank and file and lower level office holders, (many of whom won office on a reform program) who are aware of the failures of labor.

IV. 1978: A TURNING POINT

(Dashed Hopes)

The Miners' Strike

Many workers saw and understood the BCOA and government's attack on the miners as a fundamental attack on all labor. The strike and solidarity movements had an effect on the consciousness, most of all, on the reformers and activists, who responded most consistently. Ideas of class conflict were re-introduced, ideas of labor and capital involved in an on-going war, with many skirmishes and battles, of which the miners' strike was one, and which their own experiences were now seen to have been a part. The degree to which this view spread represents a genuine and important change in the consciousness of a crucial, though still small, section of the working class.

Changes in the Labor Bureaucracy

A number of changes in the bureaucracy are now apparent, including the beginning of fragmentation of the bureaucracy in their relationship to the rank and file and to the employers. There have been breaks within the top levels of the bureaucracy, and breaks between different levels of the union hierarchy. This latter tends to break down the enforcement mechanism--the ability of the top leaders to control the ranks. These breaks open many opportunities, but it should be remembered that most of the resulting fights, at this point aren't the same as a reform movement.

Another important change is that sections of the bureaucracy are moving to the left politically. Like the splits in the bureaucracy, this is basically caused by attacks from above, not by fear of rank and file rebellion, not an attempt to co-opt some imagined move from the left. It is meant primarily to convince the capitalists that labor is serious about its political strategy. Much tough talk is a plea to industry to lay off their political attack and recreate the collaboration of the 50's and 60's.

The move to the left marks an increasing acceptance of a view of society as being divided into two main classes, with coalition.

LABOR PERSPECTIVES RESOLUTION/7

politics being seen in class terms. Like European social democracy, it means increased emphasis on winning gains through politics--it does not imply a greater fight in the industrial arena. And the context in America of this leftward political move is firmly within the Democratic Party. But the language and ideas of this leftward move, its coalition strategy, and its possible need to move to mass action (eg the ERA march), are part of the opening of labor politics.

The Opposition Forces

The reform movement, though now visible, is still small, inexperienced, poorly organized and limited in its outlook. But it is in this movement that genuine class consciousness is returning to the American working class. We regard this movement as our own, and make no conditions on it for our participation. We work to build it, as well as to advance its political consciousness.

In various forms, the movement is most advanced in the UMW, the USW and the IBT. In no other union is there even a national opposition organization or well defined network of reformers.

The leadership of the reform movement is generally still quite inexperienced. Developing leadership has proved a difficult task, which takes time and/or long-standing traditions of organization and political leadership of a democratic and militant type. To a greater degree than elsewhere, these traditions are weak in the American working class, but they do exist.

There is arising, as we said, a section of the reform movement that is genuinely class conscious. This is crucial. But it is still a class consciousness bound by the traditions and experiences of the American working class. It is not yet revolutionary or socialist for most union activists. The political vision is more molded by the ideas of the bureaucracy than by the left. The Democratic Party, despite cynicism and anger, is still seen as the working class's political arena. Reform, not revolution, is still the guiding principle of the American working class. With all these limitations, it must be stressed that the direction of the process is positive.

The American Left

The American left is overwhelmingly outside of and isolated from the working class, and it is incredibly disunited. To most workers, including class conscious workers, the left appears ridiculous and almost irrelevant. To overcome this, steps towards unified activities are needed.

Becoming part of the Labor Movement--the IS Experience

To a greater degree than other left groups, the IS attempted to overcome this isolation. We were prepared to allow our actual experience in the working class to shape our understanding of how to

LABOR PERSPECTIVE RESOLUTION/8

build a revolutionary movement in the class. Unlike most "markists" we believed that the revolutionary organization and eventually the party had to be built in the working class--not that you first set up the party and then attract the class.

In particular we have learnt that despite all the mistrust and cynicism about it, it is to the union that workers turn when they feel the need to do something. The unions are still the only organizations of the working class, and union leaders the only recognized legitimate leaders with the power to do anything. If the radicals and reformers are to change anything, they must function as a part of the union, fighting to change it certainly.

Our most successful activities are those which synthesize our union functioning with our commitment to direct action, shop floor and work place struggle, that make those struggles part of the life of the union.

In addition, we have found that not all political activity within the union has to be carried out through the caucus or its program--for example we have helped form or build both official women's committees and semi-official women's caucuses that function within the union.

Being a part of the union's life, changing that life, and eventually seeking to control the unions must be central to any strategy for building a revolutionary workers' movement in the United States. The socialist movement must in the long run seek political hegemony in the labor movement, which requires participation in the daily struggles which might seem too trivial or unpolitical. The reform movement, or the rank and file generally don't take over a union and change it in one fell swoop. The movement must have positions of strength in the lower levels of the union before contesting for the top successfully.

We have learned that in becoming part of the labor movement, a socialist trend within a reform trend, we can not do it alone. We cannot alone bring socialist consciousness to the American working class, or even probably to those few unions where we concentrate. Unity and regroupment then are requirements of building an American working class revolutionary movement.

V. WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

Major Issues Facing Labor

These are not the only issues likely to face labor, nor are they "get rich quick" ideas. They are general issues meant to provide a focus.

The first area might be called the defense of unionism, and includes the workplace fight against increasingly vicious productivity drives, defending health and safety, the rebuilding of the

LABOR PERSPECTIVES RESOLUTION/9

particular stewards system, etc.

Defending the union also involves a different level: organizing the unorganized. For us this must become more than a matter of resolutions at union meetings, but ways of involving local unions and the left directly in the organizing process.

The question of merger among appropriate unions is also part of the defense of unionism. As the concentration of capital forces the question of merger on the union movement, it also helps re-introduce the idea of class solidarity of unity of our class against theirs. The left and reform forces should be advocates of unity with a democratic content/

Related to unity across union lines is the question of unity of the class across race and sex. A genuine fight for equality is needed for this type of unity: a defense of affirmative action, special training programs, contractual provisions favoring the specially oppressed.

Although the emerging "coalition strategy" of the left-moving top bureaucrats like Fraser is essentially top-down and very limited in scope (increased lobbying), it should not be the role of the reform and left forces to oppose these coalitions as such, but to attempt to fill them with democratic content and mass action.

The question of the Democratic Party itself is a tougher one for us. We should be clear that while it is on the rise, labor party sentiment is the view of a minority, and the labor party as an agitational slogan is inappropriate. In addition, we cannot rule out some forms of independent political action by some sections of labor in local, state, or even Congressional elections.

The Organization of the Reform Movement

We have learned that the central question of national organization in the reform movement is the creation of a leadership that knows and trusts each other and is trusted by the activists of the group. The problem faced by the reform elements in most unions is that they lack a leadership grouping that is both broad and aware of itself as such, has worked together enough to have mutual trust and respect, and has a large enough base to feel the self-confidence needed to take the step of forming a national organization. What is needed on most unions is not a quick jump to national organization, but a series of campaigns, actions, and interventions by the reform forces at the national level that allows them to develop a leadership in the sense we have described.

The Contract Round

Contract fights are an excellent opportunity for the reform movement to build itself because they raise many issues of vital con-

LABOR PERSPECTIVES RESOLUTION/10

cern to most workers, are seen as legitimate, and often national (though local contract fights can be important as well).

Elections and Conventions

Our emphasis in industry has always been on mass direct action, whether a small shop-floor maneuver or a wildcat strike. But these opportunities can seldom be created, and are not that common. A movement must have a life of its own, between direct action confrontations.

Contracts and other pressure campaigns are part of that. Participating in the internal life of the union is another part. Conventions and elections offer important opportunities to build, unite, and educate the reform forces. And in addition, elections are the way reform movement takes power locally and nationally.

A Newspaper for the Reform Movement

The reform movement needs education, communication and greater sophistication to grow and develop a leadership. Existing left papers, or the publications of left groups cannot do this. The reform movement needs a publication of its own that deals with the issues, problems, analysis and news of the union reform movement, the movements of the oppressed, and important national social and political questions. Such a paper can also provide much needed technical knowledge, and help to coordinate isolated individuals and groups.

This paper cannot be a "front" operation or a "line" paper. It will have to reflect different points of view within the reform movements. It will have to be a place where the problems of that movement can be debated. While it will have a class point of view, it cannot be the advocate of socialism, for that would cut it off from too much of the union reform movement.

Its central theme will be the defense of the labor movement in the face of the employers' offensive. It will have to be a tribune of the labor movement that speaks for the rank and file, for union reform, for militancy, solidarity, democracy and the strengthening of the work place organizations of the labor movement. Such a paper can help create the consciousness, combativity, and self-confidence needed for a real mass movement. It can help create new traditions that lay the basis for the development of a socialist trend in the labor movement.