

GETTING AT THE ROOTS OF SOME OF OUR POLITICAL PROBLEMS:  
SOME OF THE QUESTIONS UPON WHICH WE HAVE BEEN UNCLEAR

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I. Why do revolutionaries work in the trade unions?

The unions are the seat of working class power in capitalist society. It is here that workers are organized to bargain on wages and working conditions. Conflicts between large groups of workers and employers are possible only when workers are organized. These conflicts have material and ideological components.

Housewives are workers, yet, because they aren't organized, a strike at this time is not possible. Their collective strength, were they organized, is greater than even the miners or Teamsters.

Conflicts between organized workers and their employers--generally around a contract--shape the consciousness of workers directly involved in the conflict. They also affect the consciousness of other workers "observing" (or, in the case of the miners' strike, even aiding) those conflicts.

It must be a priority of revolutionary socialists to play a part in determining the results of conflicts between workers and employers. The most important contribution revolutionaries can make, at this stage in history, is to help bring about victories by workers.

A concrete example: Carter, in his recent speech on wage-price guidelines, set a broad ideological tone. It was the most "political" speech he has delivered. The message he aimed at workers was to hold down wage demands. He strongly implied that the stability, and perhaps even the future of the capitalist system depends on it.

Carter also made a veiled threat to the trucking industry. If they do not put up a stiff resistance to the Teamsters--the trucking industry will be de-regulated. He also called on Teamsters to hold down their demands.

The next day, AP and UPI wire stories carried Teamster President Frank Fitzsimmons' response: he was willing to moderate demands, but thought that the wage standard was too low. A good guess is that Fitz will propose wages slightly higher than 7%, but almost no changes in working conditions.

Rank and file teamsters feel the employers' offensive at the shop floor level. They are forced to work harder, faster. Supervision becomes more aggressive. Some Teamsters will be ready to fight back.

Patient years of organizing has put TDU in a position where, if there is sufficient rank and file sentiment, and Fitz delivers a very poor contract, a national wildcat led by TDU is possible.

Each contract is a test of power. Coming on the heels of the miners' strike, it could further shape the consciousness of American (and foreign) workers. Without TDU, without the efforts of revolutionary socialists, a fight back would be unlikely, and a victory nearly impossible. (This is not to say that TDU could lead a victory, only that without TDU there would be much less chance for workers to win. The traditions of the miners and Teamsters are different.)

The outcome of the Teamster contract will affect the outcome of the car haulers' and autoworkers' contracts--primarily through its effect on the consciousness of other workers.

Just as events in a person's youth shape that person's personality and prejudices step by step, events in the arena of worker-employer conflicts shape the collective consciousness of the working class.

The power and self-confidence of the working class movement is a result of a series of experiences, of events. Victories build workers' consciousness of their strength, defeats diminish this consciousness.

Revolutionaries want to affect the events that shape consciousness, to affect them in workers' favor.

Unions are the seat of working class power. At this time, the primary reason revolutionary socialists intervene in the unions is to help win the victories that shape working class consciousness.

The secondary reasons are to recruit to our organization and politics, to develop our own politics grounded in the real world, and to discuss politics with the people we work with.

Our goal--a revolution that can set the stage for socialism--will become possible only when, because of the results of events in the world, the working class is ready to take that step.

Socialist ideas cannot be grasped abstractly by most people. It is only widespread class consciousness that can be the basis for widespread socialist consciousness in the working class. Socialist consciousness will not come only because people have read the socialist press or discussed issues with a socialist. If that were true, we would live in a socialist world today.

#### A. Working with reformers

Revolutionaries work with reform unionists to help win victories. When reformers are wrong--when their proposals are likely to lead to defeats--we disagree with them and argue and organize, generally in a friendly manner, to prevent or correct those mistakes. When reformers propose actions or strategies which are correct, we work with them, and work hard. We also propose actions and strategies.

We don't demand that reformers be socialists, or even Democrats, only that their words and actions make victories more likely and the union movement stronger.

### B. The "left" issue

Let's not be afraid of the term "left." Union officers can "move to the left." When they move to the left they don't become revolutionary socialists, they move towards a social democratic position. Instead of talking of working together with employers, they talk of a class system, of class offensives. When they move right, they don't become fascists, they move right within the Democratic Party, at this time.

"Left" or "right" can also be felt on the shop floor. Resisting employers' attacks is "left." Caving in is "right."

Most European trade union officials are to the left of American union officials. This is a valid political characterization. So, within American trade unions there are left and right positions.

When revolutionaries say that Doug Fraser is "moving to the left," that does not mean that we still don't have huge political differences with him, differences that are likely to become more important with time.

If we are to understand how to most fruitfully relate to this left move by the labor bureaucracy, a move which will play a part in developing the class consciousness of American workers, we must be able to welcome its progressive aspects without stopping our efforts to battle the political bankruptcy of the people propagating those ideas.

What is important for us now is to grasp the duality of the role of the left bureaucracy in this political period. Without this solid political grounding, our work will, at best, be marked by zig-zags, or, at worst, become irrelevant or opportunist.

Socialists must be able to use terms such as "left" and "right" and be clear about what they mean, in order to be able to construct theories, plan tactics, and affect the world.

### C. The rank and file movement

We cannot have an abstract, idealistic position on building rank and file movements in the trade unions. Unfortunately, a few years ago we did, and from that come many of our present confusions, including problems which on the surface do not appear to relate to our union strategy (more later).

We do not walk into a union and automatically organize an opposition caucus. We look around first. Our decisions must be grounded in the world. We are interested in reform, not abstract rank and fileism.

An example. In Local 1010 of the Steelworkers, a caucus already existed when we got there which was organized in opposition to the International union machine. Thirty years of patient organizing,

much of it by Communist Party members, had resulted in a victory of the rank and file caucus.

We joined the caucus, although it now includes the leadership of the local, and the leader of the entire district.

Because of the history of the caucus, we were able to move in and, in collaboration with others, organize support for iron ore strikers and the coal miners. We also, with 1010 as our base, helped put together the "right to ratify" forces at the steel convention. Without the intervention of revolutionaries in an already existing caucus (which held power), these things would have been much less likely to have happened.

Had we organized an independent caucus in opposition to the rank and file caucus, most active rank and filers would probably have demanded that we merge with the rank and file caucus. Had we not done that, the likelihood that the miners' support work would have come off well is small. "Right to ratify" forces at the convention would have been much smaller and less organized, if they had been there at all.

The miners' support work made the right to ratify campaign easier. The right to ratify was the major issue at the steelworkers' convention around which opposition to the International organized. The "right to ratify" campaign broadened and unified the opposition--out of which will be built the alternative to the McBride machine. One step leads to the next.

Our rank and file orientation cannot be abstract. Our decisions must be grounded in reality.

Our abstract formulation comes closest to fitting the situation in the Teamsters at this time. From that, one can not conclude that we must operate in other unions in the same manner, or even that we must operate in the Teamsters in the same manner in the future.

Revolutionaries in the union movement do not expect union reformers, or "left bureaucrats" to build the revolutionary movement, but we will work with them, in fact attempt to work with them, to build the union movement.

Comrades in our organization who advocate a very abstract notion of rank and filism are often very effective rank and file organizers and recruiters to revolutionary politics.

Much of their fire and energy comes from a commitment to one principle, a "rank and file formulation," if you will, that comes closest to being timeless, that the emancipation of the working class will be an act of the working class itself.

Other comrades can learn from that enthusiasm, learn how to challenge basic capitalist notions of the world, however we must be clear that

building the union movement is different from recruiting to socialism. In practice, most of our comrades are.

The quicker and more solidly the union movement is built, the easier it will be for socialist organizations to grow, and the quicker will revolution become possible.

#### D. Recruitment from our union work

Several years ago we developed the notion that there would be a huge rank and file upsurge in the unions, out of which well-situated revolutionary organizations would recruit in large numbers. We were wrong. Large-scale changes in consciousness take time to develop, and are based on participation in and observation of a wide range of developments in society.

Just as a person doesn't become a racist, or cease to be a racist, overnight, so a person doesn't become a socialist overnight.

At this time, our primary role in the unions is to affect the large conflicts between workers and employers that shape working class consciousness.

Our secondary role is to build the socialist organization. The first job, if done successfully, accelerates the second. Without major changes in working class consciousness, recruitment to socialist organizations in large numbers is impossible.

We don't raise socialist propaganda as a means of building the union movement. We don't introduce ourselves as members of a revolutionary organization when speaking before union meetings or conventions.

However, ideally, the people we work with closely in the unions should not just know that we are socialists, but should continually be discussing issues with us. If we maintain these dialogs with the people with whom we work, we will recruit some of them.

A few will join us quickly, on the basis of ideas. Most who join will do so as a result of testing our ideas against events in the world. Just as mass consciousness changes because of large events, so individual consciousness changes because of large and small events.

A hypothetical example: a worker hears one of us speak on nuclear power at a union meeting. He meets our member afterwards, discusses the issues. Likes what he hears. An iron ore miners' strike. He helps organize support. A national miners' strike. He does the same, with us, picking up on what we have to say, on this and other issues. He sees that we are not stereotypical radicals, but that our major concern in the union is building the labor movement. He goes to the IS convention. Maybe, if he likes the rest of the organization, he joins.

This is the sort of growth we can expect from our union work, and then only if we do things right.

When mass consciousness approaches this sort of individual consciousness described above, then we can expect recruitment in large numbers, provided that the socialist organization is strong enough, and large enough, to engage in political dialog with masses of workers.

This is why it is not enough to build the union movement without building the socialist organization. (The belief that all revolutionaries have to do is to lead trade union struggles which will lead into socialist revolution is called "economism.")

#### E. "Raising politics" in the unions

We do not at this time raise socialist politics at union meetings or as a central part of building the union reform movement.

However, what about social issues: The Black, women's, and gay issues for example?

We have to figure out ways, as "legitimate" and convincing as possible to raise these issues. We, and the movements we help build, must begin laying the groundwork upon which future decisions and actions of the working class will be decided.

Sometime down the road, when these issues become more compelling, the working class will be forced to take stands one way or another. Those decisions will be made upon the basis of events--experiences, victories and defeats--which we will be able to have an influence on.

"Raising politics" in the unions is an art, difficult to do well, but absolutely necessary. If we are to avoid future debilitating conflicts between our trade unionists and comrades engaged in broader struggles, it is crucial for us to understand this.

#### II. Choosing a movement; how do revolutionaries decide how to allocate their resources?

When our organization decided to "get serious" about the working class, we industrialized many radicals with middle-class backgrounds. This was a progressive step--we built the reform movement, we lead struggles, and we learned a lot. Without a great force of will, a lot of bravado, strong leadership, and abstract moralizing, we might never have made the turn.

But this "turn to the working class" also had the effect of being a turn away from other movements--the gay, women's, and Black movements, etc. An attitude developed of "looking down our noses" at these other movements, in which many of our members had been involved. The movements were labelled "middle class."

Since then, we have never developed a clear framework within which to analyze when or how to become involved in social movements, or if we should help create a "new" movement.

Let's look at a recent Example where we did attempt to make a concrete analysis of this sort. Is is our involvement in the anti-nuclear movement in Gary. There, we asked ourselves several questions:

A) Is the issue--energy--crucial in this society, or could it become so in the near future? The answer appears to be yes. Just as food was a central issue in early capitalism and before, and still is in third world countries, so, as energy becomes more and more scarce and expensive, will energy become a major issue.

B) Does a movement exist, or would we have to create one? In this case, one already exists, although it is almost entirely middle-class. Because of the nature of the issue we expect the middle classes to become involved first, because they have greater access to information. The anti-war movement was first a middle-class movement.

C) Is the ruling class divided on the issue? A movement organized against a unified ruling class is not going to succeed unless it is powerful enough to confront and overthrow the entire system.

Again, like the anti-war movement, the ruling class is divided. A large section is against nuclear power, however, they are not organized. Those in favor of nuclear power are organized into the energy industry, from the oil companies to the utilities, and they have the power of capital behind them. However, the fact that the ruling class is not unified makes the potential for the movement greater.

D) Is the issue vital to working class and poor people? Could the labor movement be brought into the struggle? Again, yes. Energy bills are expected to double in the next few years. Continued reliance on nuclear power could result in large economic pressures on society. Issues of jobs and worker safety are addressed.

E) Is the issue such that broad social questions are raised? Yes. Questions of who makes decisions in capitalist society. The irrationality of capitalist energy policy. Disregard for safety questions--profits before people. An illustration of the social affects of the concentration of capital, etc.

F) Can revolutionary organizations grow out of the movement? Probably so. A comrade can work in an industrial job for years and have little general political conversation with those around him or her. Rarely, even at contract time, is there a compelling need to discuss general societal issues.

On the other hand, the anti-nuclear movement compels a more broad discussion of issues and of the class nature of society.

Those in the anti-nuclear movement have selected themselves out to fight on the issue, have acted on their discontent, and gen-

erally have left politics of one sort or another. The potential for recruitment to working class politics could be as large or larger than for the union work.

G) Is it possible to mobilize masses of people to actually challenge a section of the ruling class? Possibly. Recently, in France, when a reactor opened, 500,000 demonstrated. The army was brought out and placed itself between the demonstrators and the plant.

There is no cut and dried formula for determining whether to become involved in a movement. These are some of the questions that can be asked before making that decision.

Just as confrontations between workers and employers change consciousness, so a movement can change consciousness. For example, the anti-war movement radicalized more people than did the trade union movement of the period.

Our organization grew, in large part, because of the radicalizing effects of the civil rights and anti-war movements. Had we been more involved, how much bigger would we be today?

Our involvement in the anti-nuclear movement in Gary was partly the result of a fortunate series of accidents (a surplus of available cadre, a politically ripe situation, an issue that was a real one in the minds of the people in the area, an opening to shape the movement quickly, etc.). It is important for our members to understand that we enter into new arenas if, and only if, we believe it is practical from an organizational resource standpoint.

When we begin to address broader social issues in a real way, a huge step forward for our organization, we must avoid mistakes of impetuosity and naivete. Like a man in a desert thirsting for water, our organization has many members thirsting for ways to express their political energy. If people make unnecessary mistakes they can become gun-shy of future efforts.

As revolutionaries, we must examine each segment of society-- each class, each movement, we must keep track of a wide variety of political currents in the different classes in order to be able to analyze and shape society.

The surest way, the materialist way, to do this is to actually be involved in those movements for which we can justify the expenditure of resources.

Decisions are best based on firsthand knowledge. If, once we become involved in a movement, we decide that we were in error, nothing can prevent us from backing out.

### III. Recruitment, training, and "depoltitization."

Recruiting someone to a socialist organization and training a



person within the organization are very similar processes.

Ideally, in both cases, the person is in dialog with revolutionary socialists, and is testing theories and actions against experiences in the real world.

There are socialist positions and there are socialist materialist methods of analysis. It is not enough to learn the positions without learning the methods. To do so develops passive attitudes towards the world. We must change the world.

In the past, our solutions to the problems of recruitment and training have been mechanical--more discussion groups, more one-on-one discussions, more articles carrying the "line" of the organization.

A political line or position can easily be handled in simple pamphlets or discussions. A political method is much more difficult to teach, and must be learned over time, in practice.

This is why schemes for recruitment which center around one event and rely on overwhelming a potential comrade with politics does not work. Even if the person joins the organization, she or he often leaves in a short while.

It is this failure to teach and develop the method which has led to the "depoliticization" within the organization. Developing our method requires that we interact not only among ourselves, but with the world. And the experiences of branches and members in applying the method within the world must be communicated to others in the organization, to those among the left who are interested, and to those with whom we work in the trade unions and hope to recruit.

Teaching and developing the method is primarily the responsibility of the political leadership. One of their major vehicles should be the political magazine.

Actions, decisions, general political formulations, must be based on facts. The advantage of the political magazine is that it gives the leadership a chance not just to "talk politics" with comrades, but to get those comrades less skilled in political method to do research, interviews, do detective work, if necessary, to get at the real nature of things.

We seemed to have developed the attitude that only less politically developed members have to be trained, that once a comrade learns "the positions" no more training is necessary. However, a dynamic, aggressive, revolutionary organization requires that its political leadership continually be the best trained.

Unfortunately, political organizations, like the rest of the world, are subject to material restraints. Presently, our professional revolutionaries are paid sub-poverty level wages. Because almost

no travel expenses are paid beyond gas or a bus ticket, someone who does travel outside (or inside) Detroit suffers a relatively large loss of income. This has the effect of strongly discouraging comrades from getting out into the world.

We must raise both wages and travel expenses, even if it means a reduced staff--if the political magazine is to work, and if we are to strike at the roots of our problems with recruitment, training, and "depolitization."

11/78