

INTERNAL BULLETIN

[Ab. April 1945]

INTRODUCTION

The discussion between the Philadelphia Branch and the editors of Labor Action over the articles of Mary Bell in reply to a Stalinist pamphlet is contained in the following material. The question came before the political committee which rejected the point of view of the branch, namely, that the articles, adequate or inadequate as they may have been, "are good examples of the kind of sectarian and dogmatic thinking that separates us from militant trade unionists." It does however accept the request of the branch to present the material in the dispute to the Party for its information. In addition to the material sent by the branch, there is a reply by Comrade Gates for the editors of Labor Action.

March 14, 1945

Labor Action
N. Y. C.

Dear Brothers:

I think Labor Action is easily the best Labor paper in the country. To support that belief I do all I can to obtain new readers for L. A. When several hundred thousand trade union members are regular Labor Action readers, then, I believe, the labor movement will begin to do the things that must be done to make this the kind of country it can and should be.

Feeling as I do about L. A. it is probably natural that I get irritated when it pulls a boner and riled when it steps off the beam. And I have found a number of reasons to get riled.

Now I get sore when I feel that L. A. is doing things that drive readers away; cause them to lose interest or confidence in the paper or raises suspicions and barriers to understanding, that are unnecessary.

The most recent example is spread over the back page of the March 12th issue. It's an answer to a very mild and justifiable criticism made by a reader. The article, signed by the initials M. B. answers the request of the reader that it be made clear that L. A. does not condemn trade union militants even though they not be Trotskyites, in the following manner.

M. B. mentions Local 212 leadership, De Lorenzo of Lo. 365 and others. He goes on to say that Labor Action and the Workers Party " support these leaders WHEN, AS, and IF, they defend the interests of the workers. We think we could do a better, more through and consistent job were we in their places." " We condemn them insofar as they all to one degree or another, support the imperialist war or the pro-employer no-strike pledge."

First let me point out that the WHEN, AS, and IF is an outrageous insult to the handful of Union militants courageous enough to give leadership in the fight for independent thinking and action in a labor movement bogged down in a morass of inaction and timid leadership.

Does M. B. know how much guts it takes to give the kind of vigorous leadership Local 212 or De Lorenzo have given? If he did, I doubt that he would so smugly act as if he were God promising to dispense a sprinkling of praise or support IF the boys act as he wants them to.

And of course, intelligent union members will be terrifically impressed by the confident statement that "we think we could do a more through and consistent job were we in their places." Every progressive Unionist is encouraged by the wonderful work of this handful of fighters, and M.B. knows that he could so easily do the job better.

I'd bet dollars to doughnuts that if M.B. is a member of a union, he's one who is always trying to explain to himself. how it happened that noone appreciates or agrees with his self admitted right to leadership of his union.

And the reference to the Imperialist war. I am sure that Workers Party Union members or leaders do not get up when arguing the no-strike pledge and debate the nature of the war. Maybe M.B. does, but no responsible Union leader does.

I think Labor Action would advance its own interests and the interests of its friends if it exercised a little censorship on guys like M.B. It could also exercise a little more restraint in the matter of name calling. There is no substitute for logic and fact.

When you intersperse name calling with facts, you distract attention from the facts. Then too, sometimes you start your articles with the conclusion in your headlines.

This may sound like a sort of round house criticism of L. A. In a sense it is. Over the last year I have thought of writing about some of these things, because I hate to see a fine job spoiled by an individual correspondent or writer's bad technique.

Please continue giving us the facts. Let us think the names. And for Cripes sake, when you have a sound criticism to make of a union militant, don't speak from the mountain top.

Fraternally,
G. J.

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April 3, 1945

Dear Friends:

We received a letter to the paper from one of you. We suspect who wrote it but are not absolutely sure.

But the reason we are not printing it is because the criticism is too sharp and in some respects inappropriate for our use in the paper. You know of course, when an error appears in an article, and it has some importance, we try to correct it. We do it either by editorial correction or through the publication of a criticism of an error. In the case of the article in question we printed one critical letter and an answer. The letter that was sent to us may have some justification. However part of it is due to a misinterpretation of the meaning of the article.

There was no necessity for the remarks about the LA writer's experience in the trade union movement. It so happens that the writer did work in a mass production industry and was a member of the U.A.W. and worked in a progressive group.

There was absolutely nothing wrong in the reference to De Lorenzo and other progressives. It was correct in my opinion. That's what we do, that is, Labor Action.

The comrades must remember that Labor Action is not a left-wing union paper but a party paper when in every article we distinguish ourselves from the trade union leaders in general, even when we agree with them, and the progressives. Sometimes we do it obliquely, by insinuation, and sometimes directly. If the ideas are not important or if the occasion did not warrant it we would say nothing. For example, at the present moment we are not attacking John L. Lewis because the most important thing is the fight he is preparing on behalf of the miner's wages.

The article was not an article on the progressives in the labor movement but was an article attacking the C.P. and defending the Trotskyites, that is, defending ourselves and our work in the labor movement. If it was about progressives in the labor movement it would have been an entirely different article.

Perhaps the article did not put it in the best possible way but there is nothing wrong, and God knows it is rare enough, to say that we think we could do a better job in the union movement than people who do not have our experience and political knowledge. If the comrades will just stop to think for a moment they will find from their own experience that this is true.

And finally the problem is not what the writer would say on a union floor and this is where our critic is in error, but what we say in our paper in defense against an attack by the Stalinists on us. What we do on a union floor and what we say in the paper, what the party says in the paper, is not identical. That it seems to me is ABC.

And if the criticism had been of a different character, along the lines of the letter we published and replied to, or if it had been something like the one we received but sent in by a raw, uneducated worker - although it is hard to believe such a worker would write such a letter - we would consider publishing it. We do not want to turn Labor Action into a brawling sheet. The comrades must understand that in a political movement like ours, composed of people with all kinds of ideas, every article could be subjected to criticism of one kind or another but we don't operate that way.

The paper tries to follow a line. As long as it adheres to the line difference of emphasis, tone, etc. are besides the point. It is only when we make a serious error in line or in fact, that criticism is justified and should be made.

One final word, we get letters of criticism on the paper which we welcome. I am sure this letter does not mean to stop such criticism but read over the J.J. letter and ask yourselves whether Labor Action should publish this kind of letter.

With warmest regards.

Fraternally yours,

Albert Gates

Philadelphia, Pa.
April 6, 1945

To the National Committee:

The Philadelphia branch wishes to go on record as viewing both of Mary Bell's articles on the Morris pamphlet (of March 5 and March 13 Labor Action) as examples of the kind of sectarian and dogmatic thinking that separates us from the militant trade unionists.

The branch further asks that an explanation be made to it of why the letter sent by the Philadelphia reader to Labor Action concerning the articles was not printed.

Please refer this communication to the Political Committee and to the editors of Labor Action.

One member of the branch, Sol Allen, wishes to record an opposing vote.

Fraternally,
Philadelphia Branch

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April 10, 1945

Dear Friends:

The committee took up the matter of the letter of G.J. last night and we had also a letter from Lund on the same matter proposing the publication of the G.J. letter. Comrade Lund also informed us when he was in town that the branch passed a motion on the article in question which appeared in Labor Action.

The committee was unable to act on the matter because it did not have the motion or a copy of the G.J. letter.

Will you kindly send us by return mail a copy of the motion, the G.J. letter or a revised letter if such was written. The committee will then be able to consider all the material including the letter of Comrade Gates to G.J.

Fraternally yours,

Albert Gates
Assistant National Secretary

PS. The branch motion has just arrived.

April 18, 1945

To the National Committee:

The Philadelphia branch, having received and accepted the explanation of why the G.J. letter was not printed in Labor Action, has passed a second motion on the matter.

The branch proposes that the G.J. letter, Al Gates' answer, and the motion that the branch passed on the Mary Bell articles be published in an internal bulletin, together with any other relevant material.

We are sending you all the communications we have on the matter, in accordance with this motion... and with your request for the material for consideration by the committee.

The first motion passed by the branch, which you indicated in your last letter you had received, was that the branch go on record as viewing both Mary Bell articles as examples of the kind of sectarian and dogmatic thinking that separates us from militant trade-unionists.

Fraternally yours,
Philadelphia Branch,
Workers Party

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AMONG OTHER THINGS, WE NEED A
SENSE OF PROPORTION

It is my fervent hope that the discussion which arose between the editors of Labor Action and the Philadelphia branch does not become inflated beyond all proportion to the issues involved. In most respects these are simple indeed. Before we get lost in a maze of secondary questions, or find ourselves involved in disputing the merits of individual opinions about style, technique, and similar questions, let us set these aside. They are not really important.

To start at the beginning:

1. The editors of LA in examining the Morris pamphlet ("The Trotskyite 5th Column in the Labor Movement") were of the opinion that a reply was indicated. We received one specific request for such a reply from the West Coast. The comrades informed us that the pamphlet was being distributed among thousands of shipyard workers and creating considerable confusion.

Upon reading the Daily Worker, we learned that the Stalinists were initiating a coast-to-coast campaign with this pamphlet, reviewing it in CIO papers, reporting on it to unions and in general giving it an unusually wide circulation among thousands of workers.

2. We found the pamphlet difficult to review, because as it became clear to the writer of the LA articles, an article or two would be insufficient to deal with it properly. Only an extended series of articles or a pamphlet would make possible the kind of reply necessitated by the wholesale lying of a Stalinist journalist.

Nevertheless, comrade Bell went ahead with the article, taking up the most important points as they appeared to the editors at the time and doing as well as possible with space limitations. Yet there is no doubt that the reply to Morris was inadequate. But the difference with G.J. and the Philadelphia branch is not on the question of the adequacy or inadequacy of the reply. Nor is it a question of whether an effective or ineffective reply was made to the Stalinists.

If the Philadelphia objections were on the grounds that the answer to the Stalinists was inadequate we would have no dispute at all. If their objections were on grounds that the reply contained a wrong political line, then we would have a different type of dispute.

A reading of their correspondence reveals that they were not concerned with these questions at all. Evidently, the defense of the party, its role in the labor movement, its views on Stalinism, and the whole question of the struggle in the trade union movement is by-passed for a defense of the progressives in the union movement whom it is alleged the article of comrade Bell maligned. This in itself is indicative of what is at fault in the views of the comrades there.

3. The gist of G. J.'s letter is that we maligned the progressives. His charge is completely wrong, for careful reading of Bell's articles show exactly the opposite, namely, a defense of the progressives, an explanation of why the Stalinists call them Trotskyites, and an explanation of what Trotskyism is. Good, bad or indifferent, this is what the article did.

The article did something else. It endeavored to show that there was a difference between the progressives per se and us. And it added a general statement, that we, the Workers Party and Labor Action, support them "when, as and if" they follow progressive politics. We do not support "progressives" when they support the no-strike pledge or the war. Is that correct or not? It is so elementary, that it requires no further comment.

What does G.J. do? His estimate of the progressives and the role of the party are wrong too. More precisely, he defends De Lorenzo, one of the few named progressives in the article and one who is named favorably. G.J. is so upset by what he believed was reflection on the role of De Lorenzo that his letter took on bad tone, especially when it is requested that the letter be published in the paper. He wants to know if MB was ever in a trade union, or ever spoke on a union floor. He challenges a party functionary, an editor of the paper, to get up on a union floor and speak out against the war. It was wrong for GJ to pursue such a line of reasoning and to question the integrity of a leading party worker. But more important than that, the letter reveals that G.J. does not quite understand the party's position on the struggle against the war and the manner in which this position is concretized. He does not understand further, that it is the duty of L.A. to speak on these questions in a manner in which our members inside the unions cannot - for reasons well known to all.

This is not the place to discuss the roles of the progressives in the union movement, but at the proper time and place, it will be shown that G.J.'s views are totally false. He does not understand the role of progressives. It is one of the problems that will come up before the active workers conference. Let me state it better: he does not understand what our task is in relation to progressives; namely that we try to push the progressives forward to greater consciousness, militancy and finally, to socialism. Without such a development progressives never grow beyond an elemental militancy that fails them and us in crucial moments. A way to help progressives is to be critical. Aside from that the Party's independent position is kept clear, especially in its press.

4. The question of the right of a party member to criticize in the Party press is not involved either, Labor Action is itself an answer to such a charge. We have published criticisms of articles, line and tone before and will continue to do so. But in this case, the tone of G.J.'s letter which is bad enough and would raise the question of its publication, is coupled with a line that is decidedly wrong and contains charges which cannot now be answered publicly. In my hasty letter to the branch, I had hoped that G.J. would get the hint and write another type of letter. The reason for that was simple: a more reasoned criticism, properly worded, would have enabled us to write more on the Morris pamphlet and make clearer to the readers what our party is and what it stands for. G.J. didn't take the hint. I think the reason for it is important and I will touch on it in the closing part of this reply.

5. The matter of the LA article and G.J.'s letter was introduced formally into the Philadelphia branch. The branch made two or three serious errors. First it tried to continue a fiction, understandable when G.J. wrote his letter, but totally incomprehensible when the Branch took it up. Namely, it referred to the letter of G.J., as the letter from a reader, which of course it was not. It was a letter from a party member. That is one reason why the whole question assumes a decidedly different aspect inside the Party.

Second, it did not take a proper attitude on the question as it relates to the real issue involved, the party, the progressives, the program of the party and the manner of its application and execution. It did not try to understand what I had written them in my letter: that this was not an article on the progressives, trade unionism, party policy, etc. It was an article in reply to the Stalinists in which we were defending the Trotskyites and Trotskyism.

Instead, the branch went on record as viewing the articles "as examples of the kind of sectarianism and dogmatic thinking that separates us from militant trade unionism." It is impossible to reply to this view in this article, since it is also one of the questions which will come before the active workers conference and really concerns the whole problem of party policy, that is orientation. It is only necessary to add, however, that this view is not in accord with the opinion of the PC, nor do I believe it will find much favor in the party itself.

6. I come now to the final point, which I think is the important one. How is it possible for this kind of a difference to arise in the Party? It is possible because the writer of the letter and some of the comrades in the Philadelphia branch have a false attitude toward the question of how the party is projected in the press. Perhaps it is more correct to say that

they object to the use of the word "Trotskyist" in the party press. Not very long ago, at a special conference in New York, a number of comrades from Philadelphia objected strenuously to the fact that Labor Action observed the anniversaries of Lenin and Trotsky, carried their pictures, or published what they called "memorial issues".

Here again, the comrades did not discuss how we treated this phase of party propaganda, but objected to the fact that it was treated at all.

The party is fully aware that Labor Action has not adequately presented the face of the Party. There were several reasons for this, one at least, which was not in the control of the paper. On the contrary, the problem of bringing the party more fully to its readers, like the question of socialism, is one which we have yet to solve

But whether the comrades like it or not, "Trotskyism" is an issue in the labor movement. It has been made an issue by the Stalinists. We cannot sidestep it and in time to come will have to meet it head on. In a sense, too Trotskyism has been identified by the Stalinists with union militancy. And yet some Philadelphia comrades seem to chafe when Labor Action mentions the name.

The kind of thinking expressed in the Philadelphia letters places on the same level revolutionary socialist trade unionists and ordinary progressives who lack elementary political consciousness, is bad and gives rise to such remarks as were made in G.J.'s letter. If G.J. stopped to analyze his own experiences he would see why the party, and not he, is right.

It is necessary to remember that the Party does have a tradition (and a good one) and a program which is associated with these traditions. A proper appreciation of these traditions and a proper influence of them in our work is necessary. It is one of the obligations we have to our principles. How it is to be done is one thing; but it is important that it be done.

Albert Gates
Editor, Labor Action