

PROGRESSIVE LABOR AND UNIO



PL SAW TEACHERS STRIKE AS VICTORY

by Lucy St. John

Progressive Labor's position on trade union struggles is most clearly revealed in an article on District 65, Direct Mail Division, in the current issue of Challenge. This article correctly attacks the Livingston leadership of the union and the Communist Party supporters who back the leadership because of that union's deep involvement in capitalist politics. This was clearly shown in its heavy support for the Dubin "peace" campaign in Brooklyn.

Its conclusion, however, is utterly reactionary. It seems Livingston should confine himself to "bread and butter issues" Yes, they actually use this phrase. The Challenge writer then goes on to denounce the Workers League referring to "a tiny Trotskyist sect which spreads the irrelevant cry of 'a Labor Party now.'"

Thus rather than attacking the union's involvement in politics on the grounds of the content of these politics it resorts to urging a la Gompers for the leadership to stick to "bread and butter issues." Those who seek to counter bourgeois politics in the unions by fighting for a class political alternative are denounced as "irrelevant."

dangerous

This syndicalism of PL is most dangerous in this period when each confrontation with the boss raises the question of government intervention in one form or another. This intervention by the state is by its very nature "political." With the end of the boom in the early sixties, the deepening of the economic crisis, the capitalists more and more require the intervention of the state against

the working class.

This is very clearly seen in almost every major strike. The government intervenes with compulsory arbitration boards, with anti-strike legislation, with threats of the National Guard. The solution to these strikes is put in the hands of the capitalist politicians. Thus, we see political intervention in the railway, copper, teachers, and sanitation strikes. The character of struggles has changed; they objectively involve a struggle against the state and are therefore political.

This understanding is a Marxist understanding, a probing beneath the surface impressions, to the forces beneath. But for PL, Marxism is not a method of understanding material reality in order to intervene, it is just a set of rigid points, dogma, a set of recipes to quote at appropriate times from the red book. Thus PL is left with viewing reality as a series of impressions. It sees only the militancy of the workers. It does not see the cause and cannot lead this militancy against the very system which creates the conditions that forces the working class to fight back.

teachers

This economism of PL leads it to see actual defeats of the class as victories and thus contain struggles from going over to the offensive politically. PL's analysis, looking at surface events, of the New York City teachers strike clearly reveals this.

PL sees the teachers strike as "the most important victory against the government since the transit workers buried the old Condon-Wadlin law last year." First of all, and it is amazing how PL can be so blind, the Condon-Wadlin law was not actually buried; its ineffectiveness did not mean the end of strike-breaking but rather meant the passage of a more effective means of strike-breaking, the Taylor Law. The teachers, in fact did not defeat the Taylor Law. Shanker was jailed, the union fined \$150,000, and check-off rights were taken away. The Taylor Law is far from beaten. While it did not prevent the teachers from going out, this defiance has not stopped the legislators now from putting even more teeth into this law.

The lesson that PL draws from this whole struggle is, "when the ruling class passes an unjust law to use as a club over the heads of the workers fighting for their demands, the thing to do is to unite and smash that law, not kowtow to it." It is clear PL has learned nothing. The lesson and this was brought home in the sanitation strike when this supposedly smashed law was used again is that the political attack by the state can only be defeated by a political struggle on the part of the working class. This means that the trade unions must break from capitalist politics. Until this is done there will be more laws, more threats of National Guard, and eventually the use of the Guard.

PL's analysis leaves it on the same side with the labor bureaucracy which it so vehemently attacks. PL criticizes the bureaucracy for not being "ready to take the really militant actions in direct strikes." But this is said in the same article in which PL heaps praise on the militant action of the teachers, led by Shanker. Since PL sees the strike as such a victory, its criticism of the bureaucracy is inconsistent.

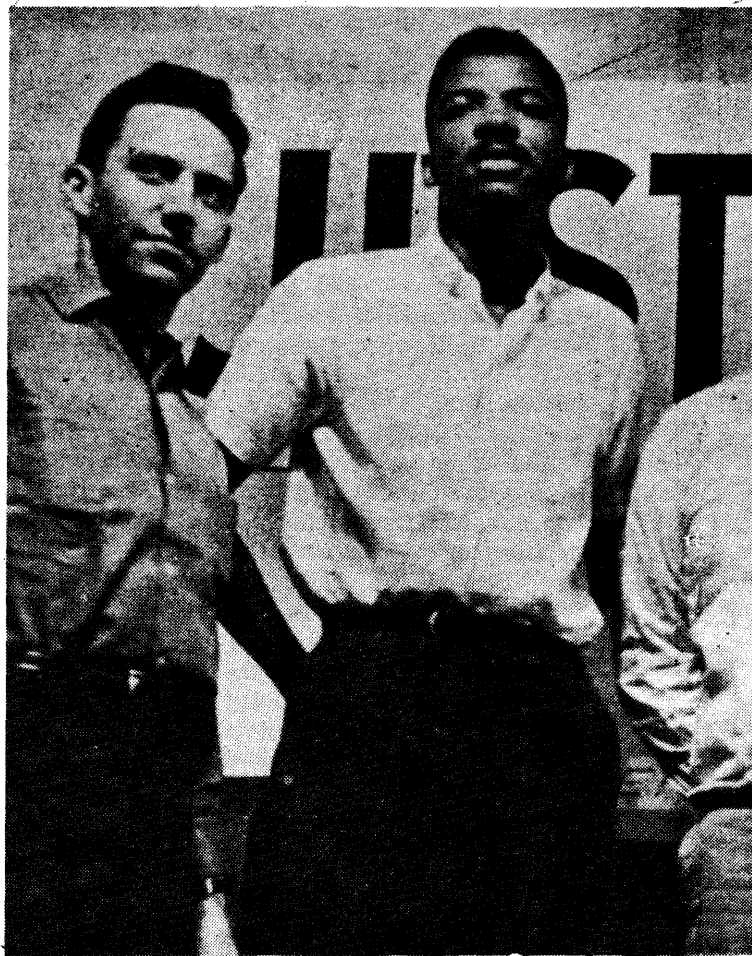
They add that Shanker did not expose the Board of Education, "as a representative of the corporations who control the city." But of what use is this exposure if it is not tied to a political struggle to displace the exposed.

theory

All of this is a far cry from Marxism. This practice PL has now formulated into a theory, the "Left-Center Coalition." They begin with a correct assessment that U.S. workers "do not understand that the solution to their problems is the overthrow of the ruling class and the establishment of socialism. Therefore, PL concludes to achieve this "long range strategic goal," "there must be immediate tactics leading up to these goals." The main obstacle PL correctly sees as the labor bureaucracy. To remove this obstacle which PL calls the "strategic goal" they propose the concept of the Left-Center coalition." The Left they define as "those revolutionary forces who have the long range goal of smashing the ruling class state and establishing

socialism." The 'Center' is the "mass of workers who oppose the bosses and their labor lieutenants" who are ready to struggle but do not necessarily see beyond the immediate issues.

PL then works out further tactics. They say to organize and unite with the Center, and at the same time to move some forces within the Center leftward, that is towards the understanding of more



FOUR LEADERS OF PROGRESSIVE LABOR (L TO R): FRED JER

long range revolutionary goals." To build these coalitions you have to "start where the workers are at, not where one would want them to be."

The task then of these Left-Center coalitions is to intervene in the "ferment" in the Center struggling around issues that the workers are ready to struggle on. In other words, struggle is to be limited to strictly trade union issues. The task of "revolutionaries" is "to answer ideological confusion that exists around such questions as the war, 'you can't fight the government' racism, unity with other workers, etc." PL attacks the "ultra-lefts" for calling for "power now" or "revolution."

Lenin

PL with all its book waving and orthodoxy appears to have missed some basic points Lenin raised many years ago. PL is very fond of quoting "What is to be Done" but appears to have missed the whole point. We quote Lenin here not to demonstrate that we are more orthodox than PL but because we believe Lenin's assessment of the class struggle and the task of the revolutionary party are valid today. Lenin states very clearly that "there could not have been Social Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness." The rank and file through their own decisions, cannot spontaneously, come to the understanding of the need to struggle for power.

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PL's great rationalization is that the "left" should not alienate the workers and thus they cringe before the spontaneity of the working class movement. "All worship of the spontaneity of the workers, all belittling of the role of the 'conscious element,...means quite independent of whether he who belittles that role desires it or not, a strengthening of the influence of bourgeois ideology upon the workers. Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the only choice is - either bourgeois or socialist ideology. Hence, to belittle the socialist ideology in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree means to strengthen bourgeois ideology." Thus, PL in practice, for fear of alienating the workers leaves them tied to capitalist politics, leaves them tied to the very bureaucracy they so fiercely attack.

party

And what about the revolutionary party? PL sees the tasks of revolutionaries in the unions in relation to these tactics is that in the process of building this Left-Center coalition it will "spread communist ideology, raise questions of the state, of just and unjust laws, of exposure of US imperialism of the relationships between the bosses and the government." By propagandizing PL hopes to win "small numbers of workers in the Center...over to a Left view." PL says that "in the final analysis this presence of revolutionary

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ideology that will not only sustain such coalitions in immediate struggles but enable them to advance up the ladder to more strategic goals." The "contradictions within the system inevitably appear." If revolutionaries organize around contradictions on local issues somehow the labor bureaucrats will be replaced and this will lead to the basis of a "still longer range strategy of more fundamental revolutionary change."

The strategy of building the revolutionary party is subordinated. Revolutionary politics are subordinated to trade union struggles. The only use for revolutionary politics for PL is to answer various questions. The revolutionaries only role as revolutionaries are as teachers. They have no role in the unions apart from the Centers.

What this has led to in practice is that PL fights tooth and nail to keep socialist politics out of the unions. While PL will unite with any forces in the center, adapting to them, at the same time they continually attack the "Left."

For those revolutionaries in PL it creates a schizophrenic functioning, a Dr. Jekel and Mr. Hyde. They are both Left and Center. They are Center at work in the unions struggling only on economic issues. They are Left only at their meetings or when they invite a few in the Center over for dinner. Their strategy for bringing class consciousness to the working class is to pluck off one or two workers and indoctrinate them over the dinner table or at classes. There is no strategy for the bringing of political consciousness to the workers in general. There is no role for socialists as socialists in the class struggles. In other words within the struggles of the class there is no role for revolutionary politics.

method

At the heart of this is the question of method, the relation of theory and practice. Marxism probes beneath the immediate surface impressions to the underlying forces to anticipate changes they will bring to prepare the party for intervention. This understanding enables the party to intervene directly in the class struggle and raise the consciousness of the working class. This is what Marxists understand as strategy, the development of political consciousness on the part of the working class of the need to break with capitalism and take power.

This PL does not understand as they have no conception of what strategy is. This is a result of their absolute separation of theory and practice. They do not see theory as a developing process, as a guide to preparing the party for intervention and the guide to every step of that intervention and developing through this process. PL rather sees it as a set of debating points of recipes to answer questions raised by individual workers.

This separation leads to pragmatism in practice. Since their theory is not their guide in practice, they are left in practice with basing their tactics on what works, what gets results. Their tactics

are not determined on the basis of the objective needs of the class which flows from the theoretical perspective but rather from considerations of how much support they will gain.

A Marxist begins with the understanding of the crisis and how it is reflected in the struggles of the class, begins with an objective analysis of the working class. He understands that the working class cannot achieve consciousness merely through experiences in the factory. Such a conception denies the need for the revolutionary party. A party is not needed just to sprinkle "communist ideology" about.

What PL fails to see is that the role of the labor bureaucracy and the capitalists is not automatically exposed. A party is required to lead campaigns which concentrate the attention of the class on their treachery. PL does not attempt to explain the political tasks required by the working class and does not prepare them for betrayals. Because they have no understanding of strategy they are unable to comprehend the posing of the future in the present, of posing the need to struggle for power in a transitional way.

PL admits that workers will not develop consciousness by merely calling for revolution now. However, they have no alternative but to discuss with the few workers who understand the need for revolution. The masses of workers who have not reached this understanding must learn through

their factory struggle, according to PL.

power

The struggle for power must be raised today



GOMPERS: MORE FATHER OF PL THAN LENIN

to the working class as a whole. The task of the revolutionary party is to pose demands transitionally in the sense that they cannot be met within capitalism. This program must be raised not apart but in the struggles of the class. Such demands if fought for concretely develop the consciousness of workers so that they can understand that in this epoch the resolution of even minor demands in their favor requires the overthrow of the capitalist system.

This is the meaning of the labor party. The labor party cannot be separated from its program, a socialist program, which raises demands that cannot be met within the framework of capitalism. The consciousness of the need to fight for a political alternative of the working class on this program lays the basis for the formation of a mass revolutionary party and is that leap in consciousness which is required for the overthrow of capitalism.

prepare

At the same time we understand the importance of the economic struggles. But we are not prostrate before these struggles. Rather we seek to lead these struggles in every way at the same time pointing out that the struggles of the workers will lead to a confrontation with the bureaucracy and with the government. This confrontation must be prepared for consciously. The confrontation with the labor bureaucracy raises political questions. It is the bureaucracy which ties the workers to the capitalist system.

The politics of PL which in simple terms can be boiled down to syndicalism combined with hollow revolutionary propaganda keeps the struggles in the framework of capitalist politics leading the way for the absorption of the unions into the state. Only by conducting a struggle for the independence of the unions from the state can this be prevented. This involves a political struggle against the state. By refusing to conduct this struggle, by containing the struggles of the workers on the present level, around bread and butter issues, PL collaborates in the destruction of the trade unions, collaborates with the bureaucracy in tying the workers to capitalism.

(The next article on Progressive Labor will deal with the roots of PL's trade union policies in its basic method.)

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