

Building a National Organization

Workers Prepare Bold Step Forward

On February 19, 170 workers from cities around the country gathered in Cleveland to take a bold step—calling for the formation of a national workers organization. The meeting was lively, full of discussion and struggle over what the purpose and role of such an organization will be. After the meeting the workers left for their factories and hometowns armed with a deeper understanding of why forming this national workers organization will represent a real leap forward in the struggle of the working class, and with a call directed to workers all around the country urging them to take up the task of forming the new organization and gather in Chicago on Labor Day weekend for a founding convention.

As the call points out, "This organization must be firmly rooted in the struggles in the plants and industries, against speedup, wage cuts and the other attacks that come down there." But the workers in Cleveland set their sights higher than simply an organization to lead these fights. As the call goes on to point out, "At all times we need a vehicle to rally the ranks of our working class inside and outside the unions to deal with the burning questions that face us—the threat of war, unemployment, discrimination, and countless other attacks on the job and throughout society."

Running through the discussions in Cleveland, and something that will continue to come up as the momentum builds for the founding convention in Chicago, are questions about what exactly the situation is facing the workers today, where does the struggle of the working class presently stand, and what must be done to advance that struggle.

Over the last several years the main contradictions

in U.S. society, most importantly the fundamental division in society between the working class and the capitalist class, have been sharpening. Bourgeois myths about the "great American middle class" are evaporating in the heat of the sharpening antagonism between the working class and the capitalist class. As the crisis of capitalism has deepened, the capitalists have been driven by the very workings of their system to further attack the working class, trying to drive down wages, force through speedup, compulsory overtime and other means to squeeze ever more profit out of the labor of the workers. "Official" unemployment rates of 8% and higher are no longer front page news but a "fact of life" of bourgeois society, and even this steady putrefaction is punctuated by violent dislocations in the economy, as goods pile up unsold and massive layoffs hit the workers.

And, of course, the attacks on the masses of people are not restricted to the plants and mills. As the decay of the capitalist system deepens, the masses are forced to foot the bill in a thousand ways, from the closing of schools and hospitals to the deterioration of neighborhoods and whole cities, and hand-in-hand with this come efforts by the ruling class to enforce it, through mounting police terror, attacks on organizations of the masses and in other ways.

The country is going to hell at a faster and faster rate, and people know it. The deterioration of society, the increased exploitation and intensified attacks on the masses of people give rise to resistance, and workers seek the ways to make that resistance more organized, more powerful and more directed. The formation of a national workers organization will serve as a magnet

in the midst of these developing struggles, drawing together fighters from the working class and enabling them to build the various sparks of struggle constantly arising into campaigns of the working class. By doing this, this organization will be able to serve as a catalyst helping to bring ever broader masses of people into motion.

The workers who are coming forward to be a part of this new organization are precisely those who are most actively involved in battle and in mobilizing their fellow workers. In many industries and areas around the country particularly sharp struggles have broken out in the last period. The hard fought rubber strike of 1976 saw tens of thousands of workers holding out for several months in the face of extreme hardship and winning significant gains. The struggle of the rank and file auto workers around their 1976 contract forced a nationwide strike of Ford Motor Company, and in the course of this battle workers in auto for the first time in decades were able to unite their ranks on a national basis against the sellout plans of the top union leadership and were able to organize a big "no" vote on the sellout contract, the largest ever "no" vote on a national contract in that industry. More recently, the steel industry has been the scene of a beginning upsurge of struggle which was focused in the recent election campaign where the rank and file put up a real fight against the I.W. Abel union bureaucracy which has been shackling their struggle for years; this struggle is right now continuing in the protest against the Abel machine's signing of a blatant sellout contract and in the fight around local contracts.

In New York City resistance has mounted to attacks on the working class and the masses of people spawned by the "city crisis." In San Francisco workers have helped beat back attempts to evict retired Filipino and Chinese workers from the International Hotel in a battle that has taken on major proportions throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. In Milwaukee the long and hard fought meatcutters' strike of a year ago galvanized thousands of workers in the fight against the companies' union busting, taking on more of the characteristics of an overall fight between classes.

In the course of battles, large and small, workers come forward who see the need to fight for the interests of the working class, not just in the im-

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mediate battles as they come up, but in a more overall and consistent way. The national workers organization will be a most important form for uniting these workers and unleashing their initiative to act as a lever mobilizing and a lightning rod concentrating the potential strength and power of the working class across the country in taking up the most important battles facing it.

Present Situation

Such an organization is not only possible because of the present situation—the sharpening up of contradictions and the growth of the working class struggle—but is also more and more of a necessity for the workers' struggle to take the strides forward that it can and must.

While the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism has led to more hard fought battles of the working class on many fronts, it is also necessary to take stock of the other aspect of things—that precisely because the "ante" has been upped and the stakes are so much higher, the masses of people generally are often hesitant to leap into struggle, though when they do so they fight with even more determination and in more open defiance of the capitalists and their agents, for the very reason that the stakes are higher. The waves of struggle that swept the country during the 1960s, especially the high tide of the Black liberation struggle and the movement of students and others directed particularly at the U.S. ruling class' war on the people of Vietnam, could not and have not continued in the same way.

These struggles struck powerful blows against the rulers of the country, and those involved in them increasingly saw the capitalist system as the source of injustice and oppression in society. But along with winning victories, these movements ran up against their own limitations—that they were not based among the masses of workers. For only the working class has the strength and power and the position in society—pitted directly opposite the capitalist rulers—to persevere in the fight, unite all who can be united, and push the struggle forward toward eliminating the source of all oppression.

Today it is all the more true that there are no easy victories. The bourgeoisie is in no position to grant concessions to the workers easily; on the contrary, gains won through struggle in the past are being nibbled—and more and more often, chopped—away at. The political climate spread by the bourgeoisie itself is less and less based on the deceptions they spread about a steady improvement in the life of the masses (an illusion that found some basis in the experience of the masses in the post World War 2 decades), but increasingly demands sacrifice from the people.

Because of this situation, large numbers of the workers are not yet convinced that the road of sustained mass struggle is not only necessary but is the only road forward, and, of course, only a very small percentage of the workers have been won to the necessity for the complete overthrow of the capitalist class. Much of the struggle of the workers is of a sporadic nature, with battles, large and small, breaking out more and more frequently but also being hit back hard by the bourgeoisie and its agents.

All of this underlines the necessity for exactly the type of organization that is to be formed—an organization that will be able to take advantage of the sparks of struggle that the capitalist system of exploitation constantly gives rise to and enable them to be fanned as broadly and deeply as possible among the working class.

Fight in Unions

The active fighters amongst the workers have run up against the limitations of the low level of organization that presently exists among the rank and file. Large numbers of workers, especially in basic industry, are organized in trade unions, which themselves were the result of bitter battles waged by millions of workers. But these unions are controlled at the top by traitors to the working class, who attempt to use the very apparatus of the unions as a weapon against the rank and file in the service of the capitalist exploiters. The fight to take back these unions is an important battlefield in the class struggle, one which the formation of a national workers organization will help to advance; but at the same time, as the call states, "we cannot and will not wait to kick the rats off our union ship before we start standing up for ourselves. The enemy we face is more than the traitors who have seized our unions and the battles we must wage are bigger than the fight to control our unions."

While there have been many types of organizations of the rank and file that have developed through struggle in the last period, many of these organizations have reflected the sporadic nature of the workers struggle itself; they have sprung up in the course of particular



1000 angry workers greet scabs in 13 month Milwaukee meatcutters strike. Battles like this, which became a rallying point in the class struggle, have helped lay the basis for the formation of a nationwide workers organization. Once formed, it will aim at bringing to strikes and battles against oppression on every front, the organized strength of the working class in every industry and area.

battles but have disappeared after those fights have ended or receded. At the same time, there have been significant advances in the last period in building some more permanent forms of working class organization, built upon the solid foundation of those workers who see the need to wage a consistent fight, not only against those exploiters whom they directly face, but to link up with other workers and other sections of people in the different arenas of struggle against the whole class of exploiters.

Where these organizations have been built, be they on the plant, industry, or area-wide level, they have played an important part in advancing the struggle of the working class, helping to bring the organized strength of the working class into numerous battles. Indeed, the national workers organization will be organized along the lines the workers themselves are organized in production, based in the plants and industries, and will also have forms to bring together workers from various industries in different cities and metropolitan areas that will enable the workers to take up key battles in the given areas.

But these organizations that presently exist also run into the objective fact that the working class is one class throughout society, that many of the battles that the class must take up are nationwide, from national contracts to struggles against attacks coming down on the masses of people from the government, such as the present cutbacks in unemployment compensation.

For these reasons the idea of forming a national workers organization has struck a responsive chord among those workers who are involved in struggle and want to fight for the interests of the working class. And because the formation of a national workers organization will provide an important weapon in the hands of the workers to advance their struggle to a new level, the basis exists for significant numbers to be won to attend the founding convention and from there to attract workers to its ranks from around the country.

One important feature of the national workers organization will be that it will be a place where those workers who see themselves as part of a class in battle with the capitalists can discuss and struggle over exactly what the interests of the working class are and how

to carry out the fight. This discussion and struggle is part of what will give the organization a lively internal life and help to advance the understanding of its members.

At the Cleveland meeting, for example, there was lively discussion over whether the purpose of the national workers organization should be just building solidarity between the struggles different sections of workers are waging now in their industries and unions or whether, while taking up this task, the organization must aim to bring workers into the fight against every manifestation of oppression the masses of people face in society, concentrating the force of the working class on major battles at every point in the struggle.

The main struggles workers are presently engaged in center around the fight to defend their standard of living, working conditions, etc., in the face of all the efforts made by the capitalists to try to squeeze more out of their labor. The strikes and other forms of resistance that arise out of this conflict are important sparks to be built on in advancing struggle throughout the working class—as was the case, for example, in the massive wildcat strikes waged among miners that won widespread support. The formation of the national workers organization will make it easier to fulfill this important task, in the face of the constant efforts of the capitalists and the top union officials to promote every possible division among workers and to narrow the scope of and stomp out these struggles.

Strongest Force Against Oppression

At the same time workers are not only attacked on the job, but, along with other sections of the people, are victims of all the abuses that grow out of the capitalist system of exploitation.

Especially as workers come to see that the same class of exploiters who torment them on the job daily are responsible for all of the injustices and oppression in society, they see the need to hit back against each of these abuses, and join together with others throughout society to do so. This is the basis for the national workers organization: to take up more than just the resistance the workers are forced to wage on the job and in their unions, to help the workers movement more and more take on the character of a fight against all oppression and to play the leading role within that overall fight. As workers increasingly take up the battles against different manifestations of oppression—and do so in a more organized way—it not only strengthens the movement of the working class itself, but gives great inspiration and encouragement to all those who suffer at the hands of the ruling class.

The working class is the most powerful force in society. Not only does it create the vast bulk of society's wealth, but it is welded together in the process of production and in its daily battles. Since as a class it has no interests in any type of exploitation or oppression, as a class it is the most consistent opponent of oppression in all its forms. This fact of modern society constantly reasserts itself in a thousand ways and is felt, to one degree or another, not only by the workers themselves (and of course the capitalists, who tremble at every stirring of the workers), but by people throughout society. The formation of this organization and the subsequent strengthening of the working class' ability to fight on all fronts will be an important part of spreading resistance to the capitalists among broad sections of people as they see coming into motion the one force in society that is truly capable of turning things upside down.

Resistance to oppression is a fundamental feature of all class society, and as the crisis intensifies, as the masses of people are asked to sacrifice more and more to the needs of the profit system, their resistance will

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grow. What is still lacking in this country today is the working class as an organized force, under its own banner and in its own class interests, entering the battles raging in society as part of its overall struggle against the capitalist exploiters. This is what will give strength and solidity to all the various battles. As the *Programme of the Revolutionary Communist Party* puts it, the more resolutely the working class fights for its interests as a class, the broader the sections of the people it will win to stand with it in this fight against the capitalists.

Relationship to Party

Another important question that was dealt with at the Cleveland meeting, and which will continue to come up as the national workers organization is being born and grows, is the relationship between this organization and the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), which is helping to initiate it.

The national workers organization will not be, of course, a communist organization. Most of the workers in the U.S. today who see the need for systematic and organized struggle against the capitalists, who see the need for the fight against all oppression, do not yet see the need for the forcible overthrow of the rule of the capitalists, to build socialism and advance to communism.

As the political party of the working class, the RCP takes on the responsibility of giving leadership to the struggle of the working class (and its allies) on all fronts. Communists do not lead the workers movement according to whim or fancy (and those phony "revolutionaries" who attempt to do so always end up isolated from the working class and acting as an obstacle to its struggle). The movement of the working class stems from the actual relations in capitalist society that compel the workers into struggle just as they compel the capitalists to attack the workers and the masses of people.

The Party can play its vanguard role only insofar as it helps build the actual struggle of the working class, helps advance it by grasping the laws governing its actual development, and on that basis bring to the workers the understanding of the ultimate product of the class struggle: revolution and the abolition of exploitation of man by man.

To do this the Party participates in and helps build many forms of organization of the working class and other sections of the people—the trade unions, rank and file caucuses and other organizations in the work places, organizations formed to fight particular abuses (like police repression or deportations, etc.). Precisely

because the national workers organization will be such an important weapon in the hands of the working class, the RCP sees helping to build it as one of its crucial tasks in the period ahead.

One important part of the life of the national workers organization will be that it will enable large numbers of workers and communists to discuss and struggle over what questions the working class must take up, what the line of march must be, and where the struggle is heading. As the struggle advances, as it must, into a more overall onslaught of the working class against the exploitation and oppression of the capitalist system, the questions will sharpen among large numbers of workers about what the ultimate aims of the working class struggle are, what will be necessary for the working class to achieve its emancipation.

As workers take up the fight to change society, and do so in a more and more organized and all-round way, an increasing number will come to see more clearly what it means for the working class to fight for its class interests and, in the process of debating out in the midst of battle what these interests are, come to see the central role of the working class, its strength and power, and its ability to rule and remake society.

In the course of debating these questions, while continuing to build the struggle among ever broader sections of people, many of the workers who join the national workers organization will come to agree with the full Programme of the RCP, and the Party will take in fresh members from the ranks of the most active and class conscious fighters. In this process the Party will also be able to deepen its understanding of the objective situation in the country, of the sentiments and understanding of the masses of workers, and on this basis be better able to fulfill its role as the political vanguard of the working class leading it to complete emancipation.

Build the National Workers Organization!

The working class stands on the verge of making an important leap forward in its struggle, building an organization whose very formation will bring together workers from around the country who are actively involved in battles on many fronts and will enable these struggles to be built more broadly, as campaigns of the working class. And the organization will grow in significance as the workers struggle which spawned it also grows, providing an important center of leadership within the working class to pull together its strength and struggles.

The enthusiasm with which workers in Cleveland took up the task of calling for a national workers organization and the growing response of workers around the country to the call is testimony to the fact that the formation of the national workers organization is a pressing need of the struggle, truly a bold step for the working class in advancing its struggle, and a step that will succeed. ■