

An Exchange with the SWP ... Trotskyism and the CIO Years

The following letter comes from Jon Hillson, organizer for the Philadelphia Socialist Workers Party.

The *Organizer* is to be commended for providing its readers with excerpts from Farrell Dobbs' *Teamster Rebellion* (June, 1978). It is important both as a refutation of the media's distortion of labor history (as in the movie *F.I.S.T.*) and as a contribution to the discussion of revolutionary strategy in the labor movement— a strategy essential to building a class-struggle current in the unions.

The introduction to the excerpt, however, leaves much to be desired. The *Organizer* notes the "sound, class-struggle leadership" and contributes to the "wealth of lessons from the strike actions" provided by the militant leadership of the Minneapolis Teamsters who, like Dobbs, were Trotskyists.

But the introduction then states that Trotskyists played a "generally negative and insignificant" role in the workers' upsurge of the 1930's, and that their main activity was to "fight" the Communist Party which was the "effective leadership of the left wing of the labor movement." This preoccupation of the Trotskyists allegedly led to their "unsavory combinations with right-wing, anti-communist elements and toward a disruptive sectarian policy toward the united front that built the CIO."

Space does not permit a thorough refutation of these historical inaccuracies, so I will concentrate on a contradiction in the *Organizer's* comments.

The Minneapolis battle was not simply a series of big strikes, but represented a continuous deepening process of class-struggle activity among American workers. In the course of its development, it posed a whole range of important questions. These included, among others, the relationship of revolutionists to the conservative-bureaucratic American Federation of Labor, union organizing concepts, strike strategy, labor-farmer and labor-unemployed solidarity, defending a union from fascist attacks, the role of communists in unions both as militants and official leaders, and advocating independent labor political action.

The revolutionary answers posed to these questions by the Minneapolis Teamster leaders embodies the Trotskyist strategy for the labor movement, which is why our party published Dobbs' four-volume series that includes *Teamster Rebellion*, *Teamster Power*, *Teamster Politics*, and *Teamster Bureaucracy*.

Isn't it contradictory to ascribe to the Trotskyists "sound class-struggle leadership" in the fierce and complex warfare that raged in Minneapolis on the one hand, and on the other, to consider their approach to the labor movement to be so wrong-headed?

It is true that Trotskyists were unable to make the same contribution nationally that they did in Minneapolis. This was because of their small size nationally and the extremely unfavorable relationship of forces with the Communist Party.

But the Teamster struggles themselves, and the later 11 state over-the-road drive, also led by Dobbs, contributed much to the nationwide workers' upsurge.

The 1934 Minneapolis strikes constituted one of the three big struggles of that year that paved the way for the founding and explosive growth of the CIO. (See photo below.)

And the American Trotskyist movement nationally took responsibility for the Minneapolis struggles. A number of central Trotskyist leaders went to Minneapolis in 1934 to help strengthen the local leadership. At the same time, Trotskyists throughout the country spread the news and the lessons of the Minneapolis struggle and sought to organize solidarity with it.

To the best of their ability, and given limited forces, the American Trotskyists as a whole applied the same strategy to their work as that of their Minneapolis comrades.

ROLE OF CPUSA

The Communist Party, on the other hand, unceasingly attacked the "sound class-struggle leadership" of the Trotskyists, both in Minneapolis and nationally.

The CP termed the 1934 strike settlement that cemented the organization of thousands of workers into Local 574 a "sell-out" and frequently echoed bourgeois slanders of "gansterism" in the union.

It even hailed the prosecution and jailing of Dobbs and 17 other union militants and local and national Trotskyist leaders in the first imposition of the anti-communist Smith Act in 1941. (This short-sighted sectarianism was underscored by the later conviction of CP leaders under the same law, which our party actively opposed.)

The Philadelphia Workers' Organizing Committee states that the touchstone of

what it calls "class-struggle unionism" is the necessity of communists to pose "the irreconcilability of the working class and the bourgeoisie and the necessity of the overthrow of the bourgeoisie." The PWOC holds that "independent political action" is the course the working class must take to break from its class-collaborationist misleaders. This is all well put.

Then what is the "effective leadership" which the *Organizer* holds the CP provided to the left wing of the labor movement in the 1930's?

Did the CP's strategic political orientation to the working class in its period of radicalization and upsurge live up to the crucial and principled standards outlined above?

The CP saw in the capitalist "New Deal" the American expression of the "people's front." It backed this bourgeois reformist ploy, devoted its efforts to "push the New Deal to the left", and ended up as its captive. This took the form of support to and working in the Democratic Party and boosting its phoney "pro-labor" wing.

In the 1936 election, under the slogan "Defeat Landon at all costs", the CP backhandedly urged workers to vote for Roosevelt.

It's one thing to lead militant organizing drives, but it's a whole new ballgame to explicitly promote a line of class political independence from the capitalist parties. The CP consciously opposed a strategy of directing the workers' radicalization out of the orbit of bourgeois politics.

This reformist strategy helped to entrench CP union leaders inside the labor bureaucracy where they helped tie the union movement to the capitalist state. How, it must be asked, did the CP's "effective leadership of the left wing of the labor movement" end up with its union officials being among the *earliest and loudest* advocates of the World War II no-strike pledge; of relentless speed-up; and of opposition to "independent labor political action" during the war? All this, under the dictates of US imperialism, represented a sharp departure from Leninist principles.

By thus helping to domesticate the labor upsurge, the CP paved the way for the bureaucratization of the CIO and for the Cold War witch-hunt. The size and influence of the CP in the 1930's should make an objective assessment of its real role all the more severe, given the enormous potential of the radicalization of that period.

Shorn of its prestige, muscle and social base, today's Communist Party is not

politically different from its forbear of four decades ago. Today's "detente" is yesterday's "collective security" — a class collaborationist strategy in deference to the diplomatic needs of the Stalinist regime in Moscow. Today's "anti-monopoly coalition" scheme is simply a replica of yesterday's "people's frontism" and support to the New Deal.

The CP of Gus Hall continues in the tradition of Earl Browder, Eugene Dennis and William Z. Foster and provides the logical outcome of historical continuity under the anti-Leninist tutelage of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

Leninism, however, comprised the flesh and blood of the strategy promoted by Dobbs and the Trotskyist militants in the Teamsters. The history of their experience touches on virtually every aspect of revolutionary union strategy, from its theoretical underpinnings to its tactical nuances.

Leninist perspectives and methods were tested in Minneapolis against the Communist Party and the labor-reformists for more than half a decade — from preliminary skirmishes to the general strike, from organizing class-struggle unions to the question of party-building. The two central concepts that characterized the perspectives of the Teamster leaders were union democracy and uncompromising class political independence.

The publication of excerpts from Dobbs' book in the *Organizer* represents a refreshing non-sectarianism, a willingness to learn from the experiences of revolutionists in the union movement. A study of the past necessarily means an exchange of ideas on the meaning of its lessons for today.

It's incumbent, we think, for revolutionists to shed the blinders imposed by old stereotypes and cliches and to seek objective political clarity on the big issues confronting us through debate, discussion, and collaborative activity wherever possible.

Without such an approach, it would be impossible to build the revolutionary party we both agree is needed. And the *Organizer* has taken an important step in that direction.

We hope that publication of this letter in the *Organizer* can enhance the evolution of such a relationship between the PWOC and the Socialist Workers Party. It is in the spirit of comradely debate and discussion that our necessarily limited remarks are conveyed.

THE PWOC RESPONDS:

John Hillson, writing for the SWP, raises two objections to our introduction to the Farrell Dobbs' piece: 1) that our characterization of the role of Trotskyism in the class struggle of the 1930's is based on "historical inaccuracies" and 2) that the CPUSA, far from being "effective leadership", in fact misled and betrayed the working class.

To fully address these points would require more space than this brief response affords. It is impossible to assess the role of Trotskyism in the US labor movement divorced from an analysis of Trotskyism as a particular ideological phenomenon and political tendency.

Trotskyism's attitude toward Stalin, the USSR, and the Popular Front are as important, if not more so, than its tactical orientation to the trade unions in assessing its general role in the US class struggle.

Similarly, consideration of the role of the CPUSA during the same period requires an assessment of the whole Popular Front policy and the Party's application of it. The questions raised by the CPUSA's practice in this period are enormously complex and call for a much more serious treatment than they have received, either from their own adherents or their various critics both left and right.

Nevertheless, some things can be said. The "effective" leadership of the CIO in this decade consisted primarily in



Scene from the 1934 Teamster strikes in Minneapolis. These strikes helped to pave the way for the founding and explosive growth of the CIO.

its indispensable role in building the CIO. The organization of millions of unorganized workers in basic industry was the enduring achievement of the working class movement in the 1930's. Even by the account of its enemies, the CP was a major factor in the building of the CIO. Beyond this, the Party's influence had much to do with the progressive character of these unions in contrast to their AFL counterparts.

At the same time, the quality of leadership, approached from the standpoint of Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries, certainly was limited. It is true, as Hillson points out, that the CPUSA adapted its policy to the needs of the Roosevelt bourgeoisie and that this shackled the revolutionary development of the working class. The abandonment of independent political action was the most serious casualty of this policy. Right errors ultimately blossomed into a full-blown right opportunist trend in the form of Browderism.

Certainly it would be a profound mistake for us to ignore the lessons of this experience and whitewash the CPUSA as the all-sided political vanguard the US working class required. But it would be equally mistaken to dismiss the enormous contribution of the CPUSA on the grounds of this same experience.

The successes and failures of the Party must be qualified against the backdrop of what was possible. . . of what the historical potentials and limits of the period

were. The combination of objective and subjective factors precluded the possibility of a socialist revolution in the US in the 1930's. A correct policy might well have produced a more class conscious labor movement and stronger motion in the direction of a labor party. But even here it would be simplistic to attribute the failure of the US working class to break with the two capitalist parties primarily to the erroneous policies of the CP. For a whole complex of reasons the New Deal had a strong hold on the US working class.

In short we would say the Party failed to do all that could have been done, that its errors were serious and had important consequences, but nevertheless it achieved a great deal. This is in contrast to the one sided treatment of Hillson which had not a word to say about the Party's role in the San Francisco general strike, the Flint sit-down, the Unemployed Councils, the Scottsboro case, the support for Spain and a host of other struggles, but waxes at length about the support for Roosevelt, the no-strike pledge and the support for the persecution of the Trotskyists. Furthermore Hillson does not analyse these policies in any sort of historical framework.

Considered in the light of the actual situation, we can at least grasp the interests of the proletariat that these policies aimed at serving. For example the defeat of fascism and the defence of the Soviet Union (both aims that the SWP subjectively supported) did require higher productivity and sacrifice on the part of US workers. Support for the no-strike pledge in this connection is at least debatable in our view.

TROTSKYISM IN PRACTICE

And what of the role of Trotskyism in the labor movement in the 30's? Is it true that our characterization is based on "historical inaccuracies"? Hillson confines himself to the admission that the Trotskyist's influence was limited owing to their small numbers and unfavorable relation to the much bigger CPUSA and some further discussion of the contribution of the Teamsters.

We acknowledge the contribution of the Minneapolis teamsters and for that matter countless other Trotskyist trade unionists who undoubtedly paid their dues in many ways. But this is not really the point. Fighters from all shades of the left spectrum - Musteites, Socialists, IWWs - all made their contributions. It is in recognition of this elementary truth that we refuse to limit the Workers' Voices column to those with whom we have ideological unity.

The question really is, what was Trotskyism as a trend within the labor movement? As far as we understand it, Trotskyist trade union program in its most abstract formulation was generally sound. The problem arises in the tactics through which the Trotskyists sought to win over the laboring masses to this program. In our view, the Trotskyists were guilty of a failure to apply consistently united front tactics, notably in relation to the reformist leadership of the CIO and most starkly in relation to the CPUSA.

Even more fundamentally the Trotskyist approach to the trade unions exhibited the characteristic flaw of Trotskyism. . . support for the aims of the proletariat in the abstract but opposition to the measures necessary to realize them in the concrete. . . all, of course, in the name of revolutionary principle.

The Trotskyist perspective on the question of a labor party illustrates this point. On the one hand the Trotskyists advocated the formation of a labor party for approximately the same reasons Lenin and the Comintern urged this policy on the CP in the early 20s. But on

the other hand the Trotskyists qualified this by refusing to advocate a "reformist" labor party. Since the embryonic labor party formations that developed were inevitably reformist this led the Trotskyists to oppose them (albeit with considerable vacillation and confusion).

While the SWP can contrast its advocacy of the labor party slogan to the CP's muted support for Roosevelt, the sectarian policy of the Trotskyists hardly contributed to the actual development of independent political action.

We charged the Trotskyists with "unsavory combinations with right wing, anti-communist elements" in the trade unions. Is this an historical inaccuracy? Listen to what Max Schachtman, then a member of the SWP, has to say in a candid discussion of trade union tactics with Trotsky himself: "In effect, in Minneapolis we are in a bloc with so-called honest reformists - who are scoundrels on their own account - who are in a bloc with the Democrats. This bloc is directed almost exclusively against the Stalinists. . . in action we are indistinguishable from the so-called honest reformists." What is Schachtman describing if not an "unsavory combination with anti-communist elements. . ." Perhaps Hillson can explain how blocking with such forces as these against the "Stalinists" contributed to the class struggle.

SWP EXCHANGE CONCLUSION

The logic of this bloc is undoubtedly to be found in Trotsky's view that "the Stalinists are the most venomous of the bourgeois agents." It is ironic that while the Trotskyists fulminated regularly against the reformist allies of the "Stalinists" like Lewis and Hillman, they were prepared to bloc with other reformist "scoundrels" to frustrate the CPUSA.

We agree wholeheartedly with Jon Hillson's call for us all to "shed the blinders imposed by old stereotypes and cliches". We are not afraid to reexamine the conventional wisdom of the Communist movement. Hopefully Hillson will agree that the same injunction applies to the SWP which after all has its own set of historical orthodoxies. We also second Hillson's call for principled debate and unity of action among left forces and welcome his letter in that spirit.

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