

In order for the working people to fulfill their historic role of abolishing capitalism and establishing socialism, it is necessary that they be organized as a class. Such organization involves two tasks:

- (1) defense of the day-today interests of the working people;
- (2) preparation of the working people to function as a ruling class.

Marxist theory and practical experience have shown that there can be 'Chinese wall' between these two tasks. Organizations which do not effectively defend the interests of the working people under capitalism cannot prepare the workers to take power in society. On the other hand, organizations which do not consciously strive to represent the interests of workers as a potential ruling class have proven themselves incapable of defending the daily interests of the working people under capitalism.

In the past, many workers, and especially many radicals, have looked to the labor unions to meet the needs of immediate defense and collective preparation. It has become increasingly obvious in recent years that the unions fail in both regards. The reason for their failure is that they are guided by the principle of collaboration with the employers instead of struggle against them.

Labor unions in this country hardly deserve to be called workers' organizations. Those in which members enroll voluntarily are generally not open to all of the workers in their industry: some of the building trades unions, which deny membership

to black workers and often to any but the relatives of present member, are the best known example of this type. On the other hand, those unions which are open to all in the industry usually have compulsory membership based on the dues check-off system: the UAW is an example of this type. Neither the existing craft nor industrial unions meet even the basic structural requirements for a workers' organization - freely open to all workers in a given industry.

BANKRUPTCY OF CONTRACT UNIONISM

All existing unions accept the contract system, in which labor and management agree to certain terms of employment for a specified time period, [n a contract, management agrees to provide a certain standard of wages, fringe benefits and working conditions. The union, for its part, agrees to keep its members working under the agreed terms. The ability of a union to secure a favorable contract depends on two things: first, its ability to stop production during the period of negotiations, and second, its ability to prevent interruptions in, production during the life of the contract.

Thus, the nature of the contract demands that the union do what no workers organization should ever do - maintain labor discipline for the boss. The unions become part of the companies disciplinary apparatus, present at every point of grievance in order to prevent any disruption of production. That this mediating function of the union is well understood by the employers can be seen in the fact that virtually any time a group of workers in

an auto plant or steel mill ceases work in protest over some grievance, the foreman or supervisor rushes to call the union officials to persuade the workers to resume production. This explains why the institution of company paid grievance time for union officials has been so generally accepted in basic industry, so that, while there may occasionally be haggling over the amount of time spent by various officials on 'union business,' the basic principle is never questioned.

At the heart of the union's regulatory role is the grievance procedure, which establishes legal channels for resolving contractual disputes, and thereby makes direct action by the workers 'illegal.' Behind the grievance procedure is the arbitration machinery, which has built-in conditions reinforcing collaboration with the employer.

Even the ability of a union to fight at contract time - in theory the time when there are no restraints - is limited by its acceptance of the contract system. For example, employers are able to prepare for strikes by building up inventories during the last months of a contract - often aided by contractual provisions for compulsory overtime. The unions are forced to accumulate huge treasuries to sustain long strikes, which have become increasingly difficult to win when the employer is a large monopoly rather than a small family business. In addition, these treasuries make the union more vulnerable to injunctions and legal suits over the use of mass picketing, boycotts and other traditional weapons of labor struggle. They also make the unions into banks, insurance companies and real estate holders, whose interests, to say the least, are not the same as the class interests of their members,

The pillar of all this accumulation of wealth is, of course, the system of dues check-off. This measure, which was originally aimed at providing the unions with a sound financial base, has become a means of removing them entirely from any control by their members. What can one say about such an institution as the United Auto Workers, whose treasury is totally dependent on the multi-million dollar checks it receives every month from General Motors, Ford and Chrysler, the checks being called 'dues' by virtue of a slip of paper that every worker is: compelled to sign if he wishes to be hired?

CONTRACT UNIONISM DIVIDES THE WORKING CLASS

One of the greatest crimes of contract unionism is that it has given legal force to the special oppression of black and women workers, and put the 'union label' on the practice of discrimination by the employers. Through stipulations of 'seniority,' 'training,' 'qualifications,' etc., the unions have guaranteed a virtual monopoly of the better jobs to white men. In this regard, contract unionism has been both the result and the reinforcement of the tendency of the favored groups to place their individual and group interests over the interests of the class as a whole, and to act in ways that amount to scabbing on the rest of the workers.

The complicity of the unions in maintaining patterns of white and male supremacy in employment and job placement has been widely recognized. What has not been so widely recognized is that this role flows from the basic self-conception of the union as the defender of the interests of its members

as a group within the framework of capitalism, rather than as part of a social class whose mission is to reorganize society.

EVERY GAIN TRANSFORMED INTO ITS OPPOSITE

We could go on and on. But the point is that every one of the great gains of the CIO drive to organize the mass production industries - seniority, the grievance procedure, the written contract, dues check-off, paid time for officials - has been transformed into a means of strengthening the authority of management. It is not possible in this paper to review the steps in this transformation. For now, it is enough to note that the regulating role which unions, to some degree, always fulfilled has become their dominant aspect.

It is easy to cry 'sell-out' at the typical labor agreement. Certainly sell-outs are common. But the root of the problem does not lie in bad leadership or even bad policy, but in the institution of the contract itself. Indeed, one could well argue that the more conscientiously, within its own lights, the union defends the contractual interests of its members the more firmly it 'rivets the laborer to capital' as 'the wedges of Vulcan did Prometheus to the rock.'

UNION REFORM NO SOLUTION

No solution will come through reliance on working within existing union structures. Consider the minimal demand for the abolition of the 'no strike' clause, which would not fundamentally alter the rule of the union, since it would legalize strikes in cases of the employer's violation of the contract but not in

cases where an inadequate contract needs amendment. In spite of its minimal character, winning the abolition of the 'no strike' clause would represent an advance for the workers.

Why has the 'no strike' clause, universally hated by the workers, persisted as a fixed part of virtually every union contract? The employers generally insist on its inclusion in the contract because it ensures smooth operations. Union officials tend to support it because frequent strikes make their work harder, expose them to closer examination by their constituencies and jeopardize their prerogatives. Yet, in spite of these obstacles, some union locals have passed resolutions calling for the abolition of the clause.

These resolutions have remained on paper. The reason is not hard to discover. Those moments at which the 'no strike' clause is the greatest barrier to struggle - when the workers wish to strike during the term of the contract - are precisely the times when it cannot be negotiated out of the contract. And those times when it can be negotiated out - when the contract has expired and strikes are legal - the 'no strike' clause fades into the background as an issue with the potential for mobilizing large numbers of workers. It is the old story of the leaky roof: when it is raining you can't fix it and when the sun is out you don't have to.

OPPOSITION CAUCUSES

More than the structural difficulties of winning even minimal reforms through the union, there are other reasons why, time and again, opposition caucuses whose primary orientation is the winning of

union elections have proven either futile or dangerous. In most cases they are futile, because the masses of workers, particularly the unskilled, the young, the black and the women workers are justifiably cynical about unionism, and will not respond to any programs, no matter how good they sound, which offer only another brand of trade unionism.

On those occasions where inner-union opposition caucuses do succeed in attracting a large following, they prove to be dangerous because they pull the most militant workers away from direct struggle with the employer into union electioneering, thus undermining the growth of class consciousness.

SOME SIGNIFICANT EXCEPTIONS

To our knowledge, the most significant exceptions in recent years to the sorry state of the labor movement are the League of Revolutionary Black Workers centered in Detroit, and the United Black Workers in Newark. The programs of these groups, of attacking white supremacy and fighting for workers' control in the plants, are in the interests of all workers. These programs, combined with the militant practice of direct mass action, make these groups instructive contrasts to official unionism and official 'oppositionism.'

As indicated by their names, the League and the UBW are organizations of black workers. It is not surprising that black workers have refused to wait for whites to join in the fight against racism before organizing themselves independently. By organizing themselves and carrying on a struggle against white supremacy, black workers are making a great contribution to the unity of the working

class. In addition, the special oppression and experience of the black workers makes it possible for them to provide leadership for the whole working class.

NEW ORGANIZATION NEEDED

The separate organization of black (and other minority) workers is not sufficient to build a working class movement able to take power in industry and in the country generally. Something else is needed, not in competition with the organizations of black workers but in addition to them. That something else is organization open to all working people, based at the workplace and carrying on a constant struggle relying on all forms of direct action, in the interests of workers as a class.

What would such organization look like? How would it function? While it is too soon to describe in any detail the form of organization which is barely emerging, certain things can be observed.

The type of organization called for would derive its strength, not from a written contract and a complicated grievance procedure, but from the cohesiveness and willingness of the workers to take action at the point of production. Under no circumstances would it sign an agreement with an employer which limited in any way its freedom of strike action. Nor would it bargain for pension and welfare plans which tied the worker to his present employer by pegging the benefits to single-company seniority.

It would not have high dues, a huge treasury and a staff of well-paid bureaucrats. Such fea-

tures are the mortal enemies of organization which relies on slowdowns, on-the-job stoppages and similar tactics of direct action.

It would not limit itself to bargaining about wages once every three years, but would intervene in the daily life of the industry in which it is based. It would concern itself with production standards, safety, organization of labor, the use of automated equipment and other questions which are now considered to be beyond the scope of the union.

'AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL'

It would unflinchingly take up the cause of the black and other minority workers, and the women workers, who have been systematically discriminated against by the companies and the unions. A central feature of its program would be the challenge to all the mechanisms by which these specially oppressed groups of workers are excluded from full equal competition within the labor force. Its determination to forge real solidarity in labor's ranks would be reflected in the encouragement and creation of disspecialy oppressed groups, alongside or and in association with organization of all workers.

It would challenge the existing ownership of wealth, and raise the question through its daily activity - which class shall own, control and derive benefits of modern industry

POLITICAL ACTION

The political face of contract unionism, which consists of electoral and legislative maneuvering

within the framework of the acceptance of capitalist rule, is as bankrupt as the economic face. Workers' organization must represent the interests of the workers in all spheres of activity. Such issues as imperialist war, the freedom of the oppressed peoples inside and outside of the U.S., the emancipation of women and other issues are matters of the deepest importance to working people.

In the political, as in the economic sphere, the stress must be on direct action by the workers, to make the capitalist class pay for its crimes against the people. Such examples as the mass walkout in 1970 or black workers at the Ford plant in Chicago in response to the police murders at Augusta and Jackson State need to be extended throughout industry, and used to prepare the grounds for a general political strike.

In short, what is needed is mass revolutionary workers' organization, independent of the trade union structure, able to provide workers with a real alternative to the trade unions and eventually to supplant them.

WHERE TO BEGIN

The starting point for any political perspective must be conditions and struggles as they presently exist. There are a number of patterns of thought and behavior which have emerged generally throughout industry and which bear directly on the possibility of building independent organization based on the shop floor. For now, we will single out two: (1) the almost total alienation and estrangement of the masses of workers from the trade union apparatus and procedures; (2) the search, on the part of the

workers, for ways of dealing with their problems which bypass the established grievance procedure. Throughout all sectors of industry, workers engage in various kinds of 'illegal' activities which indicate their desire to take care of business on their own. These activities take many forms, from mass sick calls to slowdowns to wildcat strikes. All of these activities represent a threat to the trade unions as well as to the companies.

These unrecorded job actions go far beyond the limits of the union contract. They attempt to determine production standards. They seek to remedy unsafe conditions. Often they are directed against racial discrimination. They defy the authority of management, and attempt to regulate the work day in the interests of the workers. They strive to exercise control over the use of machinery.

The workers involved in these job actions choose their tactics, not based on the accepted procedures of collective bargaining, but on the needs and possibilities of the situation. Some of the struggles are quick and decisive; others are of amazingly long duration.

There are limitations on these spontaneous struggles which cannot be overcome without the intervention of conscious revolutionaries. Except in some cases involving black workers, they usually represent group rather than class interests, and sometimes even take a reactionary turn. They are generally seen by the participants as defensive measures, unrelated to a strategy for the total conquest of power by the working class.

Because of these limitations, the usual outcome of such struggles is defeat, and the tendency

of the workers involved is to fall back into the usual patterns of contract unionism and the acceptance of the employers' control over their lives.

These spontaneous mass struggles represent the starting point for a revolutionary perspective at the workplace.

The task of Marxists is not to channel these struggles into a program of union reform. The task is to recognize these struggles and build upon them toward mass revolutionary workers' organization, that can take part in on-going struggles and initiate new ones, that can develop these struggles both tactically and politically, coordinate and extend them, transform them from group to class struggles and change their character from spontaneous to conscious acts - until they are seen as part of the path to the abolition of capitalism and the taking of power by the working class.

'MASS' AND 'REVOLUTIONARY'

Reference has been made several times to 'mass revolutionary workers' organization.' It is now necessary to define our terms with greater precision. What is meant by 'mass' and what is meant by 'revolutionary?'

Mass organization, in this context, means organization that is open to all workers who are willing to participate in struggles in the interests of the working class and that functions as openly as possible.

Such a requirement may seem unrealistic under the terms of most existing union contracts, which generally contain clauses making 'illegal' the very type of organization described. The answer is that the organization aims not at contractual legality but

at de facto legality based on its existence as a force that wages struggle and must be dealt with. Where conditions exist which prevent it from functioning in a completely public manner, the problem of maintaining security should be dealt with by keeping the movement, in the words of Lenin, 'so 'free' and amorphous that the need for secret methods becomes almost negligible so far as the bulk of members is concerned.' In any case, the aim must be to involve large numbers of workers and not just a small conspiratorial cadre.

Experience seems to show that the actual numbers in such a n organization will fluctuate as the struggle sharpens and declines, perhaps in certain periods growing to encompass nearly the entire work force, at other times shrinking to a skeleton. Lenin pointed to the impossibility of organizing the majority of workers under capitalism. Indeed, without the benefit of compulsory dues check-off, it is doubtful whether in ordinary, 'peaceful' times any of the existing unions in the mass production industries could count on even five percent of their present 'membership.' A revolutionary mass organization would strive to maintain itself as a force to which workers could turn when they felt the need, and not concern itself with inflated membership statistics based on cooperation with the companies.

What is meant by 'revolutionary?' To supplant the existing trade unions, an organization is needed which struggles for reforms, but does not confine the struggle within limits which are dictated by capitalism. The influence of a revolutionary mass organization must, in large measure, depend on its success in alleviating the ills of working class life, even while

the domination of capitalism continues. To recognize the dominance of capitalism as an obvious fact is not the same as regarding that dominance as a matter settled for all eternity.

To function as the representative of a future ruling class, to at every point of conflict counter-pose a new model of society to the prevailing one, to strive to establish and expand the sphere of operation of the new model in the face of fierce resistance from the old - such is the minimum demanded of organizations which aspire to be regarded as revolutionary. In the specific context of the workplace, revolutionary organization must not go along with the management rights clause, the labor-management harmony statement of purpose and the rest of the devices designed to mediate class struggle, and that is what makes it objectively revolutionary.

To call organization 'objectively' revolutionary means that Marxists will be involved in a constant struggle within it against various non-revolutionary ideas to prevent its revolutionary character from being submerged and to widen its perspective.

THE BOGEY OF 'DUAL UNIONISM'

It is necessary to respond to the charges of dual unionism which are directed at the perspective of building organization at the workplace independent of and counterposed to the trade unions. Generally the charge consists of three inter-related objections: that it adds to the divisions in the working class; that it leads to the isolation of the most advanced workers and the abandonment of the masses of workers to the reactionary union officials; and that it neglects the primary function of a union, the strug-

gle for the immediate interests of the workers, in favor of revolutionary propaganda and agitation.

Let us deal with these charges one at a time.

In reply to the first, that building mass organization against the existing unions adds to the divisions in the working class: it has already been demonstrated how most of the important divisions in the working class, particularly those along lines of color and sex, are in fact upheld and strengthened by the trade union structure. There have been a number of major struggles over the past few years, in auto, in longshore and most notable in the construction industry, against the use of union membership and 'seniority' to restrict the best jobs to white men. In every one of these struggles, strong organization based outside of the unions and directed against them has been necessary to win even the smallest victory. Doesn't this current history demonstrate that it is those who insist on the inviolability of the trade unions who are in fact helping to perpetuate the divisions within the working class. Perhaps in this context revolutionaries would do well to take their cue from Lozovsky, head of the Red International of Labor Unions, at the RILU plenum in 1932: "There is no need to shout from the housetops 'destroy the unions'...But that we want to break up the reformist unions, that we want to wrest the workers from them, that we want to explode the trade union apparatus and destroy it - of this there cannot be the slightest doubt."

'ISOLATIONISM'

To the second objection, that of leading to the isolation of the most advanced workers and the abandonment of the mass of workers to the reactionary trade union officials, it is necessary to reply

with three arguments.

In the first place, the masses of workers are already outside the trade unions in any but a formal sense, namely the check-off of dues. Attendance at union meetings generally is far less than one per cent of all 'members' and in many places the workers are suspicious of anyone who attends union meetings, regarding that person as either a fool or an aspiring bureaucrat. It has been demonstrated in more than one case that over-involvement in union affairs is a sure way for a radical to isolate himself from the masses of workers.

In the second place, there is nothing in the perspective of building organization independent of the trade unions which requires that those implementing it leave the unions; in most cases, because of compulsory 'membership,' the question of individuals 'leaving' the unions does not even arise - the dues will still be deducted, right next to the federal income tax.

Furthermore - and this must be stressed because it has been a continual point of distortion and confusion - building organization outside of the unions does not require a policy of boycotting union affairs. Agitation within the unions can sometimes be a useful means of exposing their limitations-and strengthening independent mass organization. Running candidates in union elections, organizing to pass resolutions at union meetings, even in some cases fighting to bring a union into a non-union shop or defend a union under attack by the company - none of these measures when appropriate represents any violation of principle on the part of revolutionaries.

What is involved is the relation between the strategy of building mass revolutionary organization independent of the trade unions and the tactics ne-

cessary to accomplish that aim. The point is that, just as Marxists take part in electoral politics in such a way as to strengthen an independent base outside of the electoral sphere, so they take part in union affairs in a way that strengthens independent mass workers' organization and does not subordinate the workers' struggle to the trade union apparatus.

In the third place, the charge of isolationism seems accurate when applied to those who would set up so-called 'red front' unions with membership based on explicit adherence to a set of revolutionary principles. That is a sectarian approach and would lead to the isolation of those attempting it. But it is just as possible to make that sort of sectarian error even when concentrating on building inner-union caucuses. On the other hand, it is possible to develop independent organizations which work in a reformist and opportunist fashion. There is no simple organizational guarantee against either sectarianism or Right-opportunism in mass work.

PROPAGANDA

The final objection to the line of building independent mass organization - that it neglects the fight for the immediate interests of the workers in favor of revolutionary propaganda and agitation - breaks down completely after an examination of the real world. If nothing else is clear about the situation in this country, it is obvious that the unions are not adequately defending the immediate interests of the workers. As has already been pointed out, the reasons for this are not primarily bad leadership or policies but the very structure of the unions. It has become virtually impossible to even defend existing conditions, let alone improve them, while

restricted by the 'no strike' clause, the three-year contract, the grievance procedure, etc. The fact that some union officials, on occasion, encourage from behind the scenes wildcat strikes or other violations of the contract only emphasizes the bankruptcy of contract unionism and the need to make a categorical break with it.

This charge of neglecting the immediate interests of the workers could well be turned around: it is not those who set forth on the path of independent organization but those who will not turn loose of the corpse of contract unionism who are in fact making it more difficult for the workers to resist the deterioration of wage scales, the lengthening of the work day, the intensification of speedup and the increasing risk to personal safety on the job - by failing to make a frontal attack on the class collaboration of the labor contract.

Furthermore, there is more than one 'Marxist-Leninist' organization in this country which, while covering a great deal of paper with ink to 'prove' the need for communists to work in reactionary trade unions, interprets that work to mean almost entirely revolutionary propaganda and agitation.

It is now about two years that the Sojourner Truth Organization, known more generally through its newspaper, The Insurgent Worker, has existed in the Chicago area and attempted to put into practice the line of building independent mass organization at the workplace. During this time it has been necessary to grapple with a number of questions relating to how to build rather than what to build. Some experience has been accumulated regarding such matters as the use of newsletters at the workplace, the structuring of organizations, establishing links with groups based in the communities, the develop-

ment of campaigns which bring together workers from more than one enterprise, the utilization of union grievance procedures and NLRB channels, mobilization and pressure within the union, political work in non-union shops, strengths and weaknesses of different sectors of the working class and other questions which are beyond the scope of this paper. These matters and another whole area of questions regarding the building of a Marxist-Leninist Party and its relation to mass revolutionary organizations will have to await proper treatment in the future.

The great labor upsurge of the 1930's led to the pushing aside of the old craft unions and the formation of the CIO. The coming upsurge of the 1970's represents a challenge to the past more profound even than that which produced the CIO. If it is to have any lasting impact, it must lead to the pushing aside of the old unions, more thoroughly than was done by the CIO, and the formation of new-type organization. It is the task of revolutionaries to recognize this process, align themselves with it and help it to fruition.

January, 1972