

Opportunism Within The Trade-Union Left Wing

By Earl R. Browder

DESPITE the considerable advances being made by the left wing in the American trade unions, it is still a fact that its progress is hampered, to quite an extent, by the remnants of opportunism still existing in the theory and practice of sections of the left-wing movement. This opportunistic tendency is, at the same time, accompanied by an exaggerated "left" tendency which is equally harmful. The two tendencies spring from the same root. They are also directly related (in a political sense and often organically) to the tendency designated by the Comintern as "Loreism," the remnants of the Second-and-a-half International ideology, within the Communist movement of America.

We have had much experience with these deviations within the American left-wing movement. In the struggle against them we have learned to recognize their existence quickly by certain symptoms—resistance to centralized leadership, surrender of initiative to temporary allies, lack of clear definition of left-wing policies, insistence of temporary and sectional over general interests, etc., with an accompanying inclination, on the one hand, to impatiently demand "practical" results before a solid basis has been laid in work, and, on the other hand, to be satisfied with formal victories from which the substance has disappeared by loss of the masses or by surrender of issues—all of them symptoms which accompany, in whole or in part, fundamental deviations from a correct revolutionary line of policy in the labor movement. They are equally characteristic of deviations in trade-union work and in general political problems and constitute a phase of Loreism, which must be combatted equally in the trade-union work as in the Party generally.

How the Deviations Block Left-Wing Progress.

Some comrades are inclined to dismiss such discussions as this as "impractical," "abstract," and "factional." But the problem is of the most enormous practical significance, involving the very life of the revolutionary movement as an effective power. It is the most practical and concrete question before us now, and upon its solution depends the successful liquidation of factionalism within the revolutionary movement. A few illustrations will show how different manifestations of Loreism within the left wing in the trade unions have blocked progress and set back or endangered the left wing.

In the miners' union there is a tremendous left-wing sentiment, which exerts controlling power in hundreds of local unions, and many sub-districts and districts. In the national election a few months ago this left wing was credited, by its enemies, with more than one-third of the total vote and probably cast a majority in reality. And yet, at the convention early in 1924, this strong left wing did not crystallize sufficient power to register itself in concrete results in proportion to its strength. The principle weakness which blocked victory was this fundamental deviation we are discussing—expressed in **resistance to centralized leadership** (avoiding caucus meetings which hammered out united tactics), **surrender of initiative** (allowing, for example, the

Howat issue to be postponed until the last hour of the convention upon the advice of "friends"), **lack of clear definition of left-wing policies** (failure of left-wing delegates to speak clearly upon all their most important resolutions), **insistence of sectional over general interests** (failure to establish a close combination of Nova Scotia and Kansas fights with the whole left-wing fight, caused by the narrow outlook of many delegates). In spite of the most heroic efforts on the part of the left-wing leadership these deviations were so deeply grounded in many delegates that before they could be overcome the convention had been adjourned with Lewis still in the saddle.

The same deviations were strongly in evidence in districts of the miners' union where the left-wing elements are numerous. It is only under the tremendous pressure of the crisis in the coal industry, and the consequent bitter struggle forced upon the left wing, that many of the wrong policies are now being straightened out in the Illinois field. If the left wing had become, two years ago, a solid, homogeneous monolithic body with a centralized leadership and clear-cut policies, the struggle would today be much more favorable for the left wing.

Deviations in the Needle Trades.

It is in the needle trades that our problem is presented in its most acute form at the present moment. Here we have had a struggle going on within the left-wing, between a minority of the needle trades leading committee supported by the National Committee of the T. U. E. L. and by the Central Executive Committee of the Party, and, on the other side, the majority of the needle trades committee containing some of the most energetic and able leaders of the left. This internal struggle occurs at the precise moment when the unions as a whole face an acute crisis, and the left wing is tackling the biggest problems presented to it in years. It is precisely because **every decision on policy** made today by the needle trades committee, will affect the entire development of the American labor movement **for years to come**, that it was necessary to sharply challenge the opportunistic tendencies that had appeared in its work in a magnified form.

The deviations in the needle trades had all of the classic characteristics described above. Resistance to the suggestions and direction of the centralized leadership, present in a mild form for years, strengthened itself (summarized in the phrase, "Let the politicians keep their hands off trade union matters"), surrender of initiative (failure to halt the anarchistic "dues strike" in the A. C. W., launched by irresponsible elements), lack of clear definition of policies (no official statement of complete program of economic demands; support of certain reactionaries for official position on the grounds of "weakening the machine"; etc.), too much concentration upon a few important local unions in the New York market, at the expense of neglecting the other unions and the national phase of the fight (connections with, programs and detailed instructions for, cities outside of New York allowed to lapse into the most casual routine). Only the sharpest kind of criticism and ideological struggle against

these manifestations prevented the movement from drifting into a morass of opportunism.

The Common Root of Opportunism and Sectarianism.

When the tendencies which we have described are allowed to develop unchecked, and keep their connection with the masses of the workers, the result is an opportunism that liquidates the left wing into the amorphous mass and, instead of leading dissolves into the masses. When the left wing reacts blindly away from the destructive effects of this opportunism, if it is not armed with Leninism, with the clearest revolutionary theoretical guidance, it is in imminent danger of lapsing into sectarianism, twin-brother of opportunism. These two evils have a common root.

The common origin of sectarianism and opportunism lies in the lack of a complete revolutionary theory unified in all details with practice. In the absence of an understanding of Leninism, the practical workers in the trade-union left wing develop an idea that there are two sides to their work—the "revolutionary" and the "practical." They know they must have both these qualities, but find that the combination is difficult. An easy solution (so it seems to them) is to be "revolutionary" part of the time and on some issues, while at other times and on other issues they may be "practical." Insidiously there is developed a contradiction, a divergence, between theory and practice which, if allowed to develop to its logical conclusion must inevitably destroy the left-wing movement with which it is permeated.

In the first instance, this divergence between theory and practice is at the expense of the revolutionary theory, which is relegated to ceremonial occasions, formal resolutions, and the like. And in the second place, when a reaction against the disastrous results of opportunism sets in, it gives rise to wild adventures, "leftist" policies, splitting tendencies, etc. The opportunist who has "reformed" (but who has failed to grasp the essentials of Leninism) is almost sure to become the "putschist," the ultra-left advocate. Finding that "being practical" was a failure, he decides to "be revolutionary" without being practical. The result is sectarianism. One medicine required at this moment to combat the infantile sicknesses of opportunistic and sectarian tendencies inside the left wing, is the understanding that it is **impossible to be revolutionary, in any true sense, without being practical at the same time**. It is equally true that it is **impossible to be practical unless the practice, in every detail, conforms to the revolutionary objective**.

Opportunist and Sectarian Illusions.

Opportunist errors are accompanied by illusions, a belief that results can be accomplished by "short-cuts," without preparing the foundation in slow, patient work. There is an old saying that "even God cannot create a two-year-old child in one minute," but the opportunist always believes that, by some trick, he can avoid the pains incident to a struggle for the revolutionary objective. But always the trick that avoids the struggle leads also away from the victory.

In my article last month, "Left-Wing Advances in the Needle Trades," there occurred a peculiar typographical error. I had written that "18 months after Kauffman had caused the leader of the left wing, B. Gold, to be beaten up and expelled—a combination under the leadership of Gold and the left wing was elected to office. . . by a majority of ten to one." The printer who set this into type changed "months" to "minutes," the proof-reader overlooked the error,

and the readers of the WORKERS MONTHLY were either startled or amused to see that "18 minutes" after being beaten up and expelled, B. Gold had swept an election by tremendous majority. When an acquaintance of mine expressed delight at hearing of such a swift and spectacular victory, and I could not detect any twinkling in his eyes or any sign that he was trying to "kibbitz" me, I decided that he was the victim of opportunist illusions. (I will leave it to the pupils of Freud to explain the pathology behind the mistakes of the printer and proof-reader).

Sectarian errors also carry illusions with them, to the effect that if one can achieve the form of one's object, the substance is not of particular importance. It is a mild form of the same general type of petty-bourgeois aberration which, in its more violent aspects, becomes "Christian Science" and spiritualism. Like the illusions of opportunism, those of sectarianism also lead away from the struggle and compromise the interests of the working class.

And there I cannot refrain from pointing out another typographical error which occurred recently (quite embarrassingly) and which may sharpen up the point we are making. In the "Little Red Library, Volume I," entitled "Trade Unions in America," on page 15 is given a list of the publications in 1912 and 1913, by the Syndicalist League of North America. In the pamphlet as it appeared was mentioned "The Editor" of Kansas City. A comrade who knew that the real name of that publication was "The Toiler," and that a certain fellow named Browder had done a deal of editorial work on that magazine and was suspected of ambitions to get his name emblazoned in glory as the "editor," came to me and accused me of having unconsciously gratified that long-suppressed desire in this typographical mistake, in which "the toiler" who did the work was suddenly transformed into "the editor." I hope it is not necessary for me to say that I was not responsible for the proof-reading and, therefore, the amateur psycho-analytic efforts of my comrade did not cause me to blush. But the incident, in addition to being amusing, gives me an opportunity not only to get the historical record straight as to the name of that syndicalistic publication, but also to point out that to change a "toiler" into an "editor" (or to make an editor toil) is a very desirable thing, but it requires something more than a typographical error or a wish. It requires a great deal of long, hard, patient effort and struggle in order to achieve anything substantial; failure to realize this fact leads to closet-philosophy and sectarian illusions. It leads to the illusion that changing the name "sect" into "mass industrial union" will make a sect of more importance in the world of reality.

Leninism versus Loreism.

A prominent characteristic of Loreism, a tendency which must be combatted in all fields of revolutionary effort, is this artificial separation of revolutionary theory and practice—to the destruction of both. This is especially true in the field of trade union work.

Against this deviation, in all its many forms, we must set up the theory and practice of Leninism, and translate this into the very life-fabric of our movement. One of the first things which Leninism gives to us, and which we must make the common property of every revolutionary worker in America, is the complete unity of theory and practice in the struggle for the smallest demand of the workers as well as for the establishment of the working-class state.