

Some general theses on communist work in the trade unions

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1. The trade unions, being the broadest and most elementary form of working class organization for fighting the capitalists (specifically over the price and conditions of sale of labor power), **must “learn to act deliberately as organising centres of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation.”**¹
2. However, the complete emancipation of the working class requires that it *act as a class* against the *whole* of the bourgeoisie; it is not enough for each segment of the class in each workplace to struggle economically against its particular boss, nor for each trade to act against the bosses in that trade, nor for *all* trades to act against all the *employers*, for *even then* such a movement does not bring the entire proletariat into combat against the entire bourgeoisie and its state. As such, the trade union form of organization, while necessary, is insufficient; the proletariat must “constitute itself into a political party” and fight to conquer political power. Meanwhile, as Marx wrote, “the combination of forces which the working class has already effected by its economical struggles”—the trade unions—“ought at the same time to serve as a lever for its struggles against the political power of landlords and capitalists.”² Marx, in a letter to Bolte, further outlined the relationship of the economic struggle and trade unions to the political struggle of the proletariat as follows:

“The political movement of the working class has as its object, of course, the conquest of political power for the working class, and for this it is naturally necessary that a previous organisation of the working class, itself arising from their economic struggles, should have been developed up to a certain point. On the other hand, however, every movement in which the working class comes out as a class against the ruling classes and attempts to force them by pressure from without is a political movement. For instance, the attempt in a particular factory or even a particular industry to force a shorter working day out of the capitalists by strikes, etc., is a purely economic movement. On the other hand the movement to force an eight-hour day, etc., *law* is a *political* movement. And in this way, out of the separate economic movements of the workers there grows up everywhere a *political* movement, that is to say a movement of the *class*, with the object of achieving its interests in a general form, in a form possessing a general social force of compulsion. If these movements presuppose a certain degree of previous organisation, they are themselves equally a means of the development of this organisation.”³

- a. The Russian Revolution further clarified the need for a *Communist vanguard Party* to lead the proletariat as well as allied classes and strata both during the revolution, and afterwards during the construction of socialism. This “party of a new type” has as its members *specifically* the vanguard of the working class, meaning its most resolute, most far-seeing, most advanced section. Hence, “until the proletariat has captured state power and has finally consolidated its rule against bourgeois restoration, the Communist Party will, as a rule, have only a minority of workers organized in its ranks.”⁴ That said, the Party must maintain the strongest links with the widest

¹ <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1866/instructions.htm#n06>

² <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/09/politics-resolution.htm>.

³ https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71_11_23.htm

⁴ *Resolution on The Role of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution*. From the Comintern’s Second Congress. Of course, the nature, composition, and size of this vanguard of the class, and thus of the Party, necessarily changes throughout the various stages in the struggle to overthrow the bourgeoisie, as well as in the various stages in the struggle to consolidate socialism. At certain points, such as during the revolutionary crises of 1905-1907 and 1917, the Communist Party accepts mass

possible mass of the workers if it is truly to act as the vanguard layer of the whole class. The trade unions in particular play a vital role “link[ing] up the Party with the masses, *i.e.*, the vanguard with the class,”⁵ and for this reason the Party needs the trade unions. At the same time, the trade unions need the Party’s guidance in order to transform into “schools of communism” and “levers” in the proletariat’s revolutionary struggle to establish its class dictatorship (and later in the construction of socialism onwards to communism). As organizations which in their origins *necessarily* embrace only specific segments of the class—and have as the bulk of their activity the economic struggle *as it exists wholly within the terms of the capitalist system*—the trade unions, if left to themselves, cannot help but degenerate and fall far short of their potential role as emancipatory organizing centers.

- i. A Communist Party must necessarily equip itself with the most advanced revolutionary science, based upon a summation of the whole of the proletariat’s revolutionary experience up to the moment in question. In the present era, this means the Communist Party must be a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist (MLM) Party.
3. Right now in the United States, we lack a Communist (Maoist) Party, or any manifestation whatsoever of independent working class political action. Moreover, we have a weak trade union movement embracing only a small portion of the class, and at its head is a deeply entrenched, deeply reactionary officialdom that works closely with the bourgeoisie to stifle the class struggle as much as possible. Hence, in order to have a socialist revolution in this country we must first develop a strong Communist (Maoist) Party capable of leading a powerful trade union movement and of freeing that movement from the domination of reactionary leadership. To this end, the task of organizing the unorganized must be linked up with the struggle to drive the reactionary officialdom out of the existing unions. Lenin’s words in *Left Wing Communism* in this respect are absolutely essential: “This struggle must be waged ruthlessly, and it must unfailingly be brought—as we brought it—to a point when all the incorrigible leaders of opportunism and social-chauvinism are completely discredited and driven out of the trade unions. **Political power cannot be captured (and the attempt to capture it should not be made) until the struggle has reached a *certain* stage. This “*certain* stage” will be *different in different countries and in different circumstances; it can be correctly gauged only by thoughtful, experienced and knowledgeable political leaders of the proletariat in each particular country.*”**
4. The reactionary officialdom does not exist magically above the class, it is not some artificial implant grafted onto the labor movement by the bourgeoisie as part of a conspiracy to keep the labor movement in check. Rather, it has its material basis in the development of relatively privileged strata of the working class. The nature of these strata and of the reactionary officialdom varies from country to country and has changed over time. It is essential to form a scientific appraisal of their nature at each given stage of the

influxes of members, precisely because a much larger mass of workers awaken and step up into a truly vanguard role in the midst of such a crisis. Indeed, the resolution further clarifies: “The necessity of a political party for the proletariat can cease only with the complete abolition of classes. On the way to this final victory of communism it is possible that the relative importance of the three fundamental proletarian organisations of modern times (Party, Soviets and Industrial Union) may undergo some change; and that gradually a *single type of workers’ organisation will be formed*. The Communist Party, however, will become absorbed in the working class only when *Communism ceases to be the object of struggle*, and the whole working class shall have become Communist.”

⁵<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lozovsky/1935/marx-trade-unions/ch11.htm#doc-13>

struggle in order to formulate a correct line for the fight to drive out the reactionary leaders, and a correct approach to the various relatively privileged strata of the working class. Developing a clear scientific understanding of the stratification of the working class (inside and outside of the organized labor movement) is an essential aspect of class analysis of the whole country, which cannot be carried out all at once, but must be developed over a long period of time and through participating in and leading the proletariat's struggles.

- a. In particular, the most secure and consistent base of the reactionary union leaders is the labor aristocracy which is only a small subsection of the working class, and in our day is *not* equivalent to the trade union membership as a whole. This formation originally developed in England among the skilled tradesmen as a direct result of the virtual industrial monopoly that England had in the world. However, with the development of capitalist imperialism, Lenin considered it was no longer possible to bribe such a large section of the working class:

“It was possible in those days to bribe and corrupt the working class of one country for decades. This is now improbable, if not impossible. But on the other hand, every imperialist “Great” Power can and does bribe smaller strata (than in England in 1848–68) of the “labour aristocracy.” Formerly a “bourgeois labour party”, to use Engels’s remarkably profound expression, could arise only in one country, because it alone enjoyed a monopoly, but, on the other hand, it could exist for a long time. Now a “bourgeois labour party” is inevitable and typical in all imperialist countries; but in view of the desperate struggle they are waging for the division of spoils it is improbable that such a party can prevail for long in a number of countries. [...] On the economic basis referred to above, the political institutions of modern capitalism—press, parliament associations, congresses etc.—have created political privileges and sops for the respectful, meek, reformist and patriotic office employees and workers, corresponding to the economic privileges and sops. Lucrative and soft jobs in the government or on the war industries committees, in parliament and on diverse committees, on the editorial staffs of “respectable”, legally published newspapers or on the management councils of no less respectable and “bourgeois law-abiding” trade unions—this is the bait by which the imperialist bourgeoisie attracts and rewards the representatives and supporters of the “bourgeois labour parties.”⁶

- i. In the US, the ruling class has been able to bribe a minority subsection of the working class for a long period of time. The height of this bribery was likely reached during the New Deal era, but especially since the mid 70s more and more of the labor aristocracy has seen its privileges severely eroded. We need to do much more investigation however to determine more exactly how the labor aristocracy in this country has changed over time, how large it ever truly got and how large it is today.
- b. While there is no bourgeois Labor Party in the US, there is a section of the petty-bourgeoisie (of the “office employees and workers” in the tech industry, graduate school, NGOs, etc.) which forms an important part of the reactionary union leaders’ base. We can see this phenomenon very clearly in the recent support for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) leadership in the UPS contract struggle by organizations like Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the Party for Socialism and Liberation, Freedom Road Socialist Organization, and Labor Notes, which are principally based among the petty-bourgeois liberal office workers and NGO activists. These leading “progressives”, pseudo-socialists, and social democrats

⁶ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/oct/x01.htm>

- in the labor movement *are the exact types of people Lenin describes as the opportunist leaders who must be driven out of the unions.*⁷
- c. Much of the union leadership in the US isn't currently (nor has it been historically) in the hands of these types of "socialist" opportunists, however. Many in leadership come from the long line of overtly pro-capitalist, incredibly corrupt, mafia-linked "business unionist" officials. This old-guard reactionary union leadership (the Hoffas, O'Briens, Dennis Williams, etc.) is often more overtly corrupt and repressive, but the social-opportunist leaders are much more capable of poisoning, misdirecting, and coopting the most active workers and the self-identified Marxists pouring into the labor movement, and will sometimes closely ally themselves with a section of the old guard as we have seen with Teamsters and O'Brien. Therefore, these opportunists are often a bigger obstacle to some of our key basic tasks at present, in particular the task of winning over the semi-Marxists entering the labor movement. That being said, we must differentiate between confused and genuine progressives and those just learning Marxism versus the *leading members* of these opportunist groups and organizations, like the David Levins (of DSA and TDU) and Kim Moodys. And we must also not hesitate to exploit contradictions between these opportunists and old-guard reactionaries when they exist, including in some occasions by forming tactical alliances with the opportunists. This will be particularly important when we face a full-frontal attack from old guard reactionaries including mass expulsions, violent mafia tactics, etc.
 - d. What's more, the leadership of the unions has been transformed into a literal bourgeois profession, with a series of petty-bourgeois staffers and "organizers" underneath them, not unlike the structure of NGOs with directors and staff. At one point, it was rare for there to be trade union officials that didn't come up from the working class and in the specific craft of their union. Now the ranks of the union staff and bureaucracy are infested with people not from a working class background, who have become technocratic professionals and functionaries. We need to further investigate these realities and how they support and operate as appendages of the reactionary union leaders, as well as various contradictions within the union bureaucracy that we can use to aid in our efforts to bore from within.
5. The struggle against the reactionary officialdom requires the consolidation of a left-wing opposition within and across the trade unions capable of contending with the reactionaries and opportunists for leadership of the labor movement. This cannot be reduced to fighting for positions of leadership in the unions. The precise nature, composition, and organizational forms of this opposition will change throughout the development of this struggle, but a constant feature of its program must be that **it**

⁷ "In countries more advanced than Russia, a certain reactionism in the trade unions has been and was bound to be manifested in a far greater measure than in our country. Our Mensheviks found support in the trade unions (and to some extent still do so in a small number of unions), as a result of the latter's craft narrow-mindedness, craft selfishness and opportunism. The Mensheviks of the West have acquired a much firmer footing in the trade unions; there the *craft-union, narrow-minded, selfish, case-hardened, covetous, and petty-bourgeois "labour aristocracy", imperialist-minded, and imperialist-corrupted*, has developed into a much stronger section than in our country. That is incontestable. The struggle against the Gomperses, and against the Jouhaux, Hendersons, Merrheims, Legiens and Co. in Western Europe is much more difficult than the struggle against our Mensheviks, who are an *absolutely homogeneous* social and political type. This struggle must be waged ruthlessly, and it must unfailingly be brought—as we brought it—to a point when all the incorrigible leaders of opportunism and social-chauvinism are completely discredited and driven out of the trade unions."

unapologetically aims to transform the trade unions into organizations truly operating in the “broad interest of the working class’s complete emancipation,” i.e. for the abolition of capitalism.

- a. Given that, as noted above, this emancipation requires that the working class act as a class—meaning that it acts politically—the program must also stress the need for the unions to take up political action independent of all bourgeois parties. This has historically involved agitating for the trade unions to join other working class organizations (in particular, the Communist Party) in forming a mass electoral Labor Party as a special kind of united front. This was done by the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL) and Trade Union Unity League (both led by the CPUSA) in the 1920s and 1930s. Almost certainly, U.S. communists and the trade union left-wing today will need to pursue a similar course. However, precisely *when and if* to raise the formation of such a Labor Party as a *central* slogan for the trade union opposition, and precisely *how* communists should bring together and work inside such a party, is much harder to say. We must investigate this question much more thoroughly and sum up the lessons of past experiences of Communist Parties in the US and elsewhere. What we can say for certain however is that communists must *never* conflate the role of a Labor Party of this sort with the role of the Communist Party, and must maintain their organizational independence within any such Labor Party.
6. The struggle for leadership of the trade union movement and for its considerable strengthening and expansion will pass through various stages prior to reaching the stage Lenin refers to above, in which capture of political power is possible. The nature of communist organization, of the organization(s) of the left-wing trade union opposition, and of the relation between the two will transform throughout these stages. We foresee three principal stages:
 - a. Current stage: There is no strong communist organization, much less a party, and no organized left-wing opposition to the reactionaries and opportunists in the trade unions. The central tasks here are to develop the organization of communists and lay the groundwork for a party, side by side with laying the groundwork for an organized left opposition across the trade union movement. An organized opposition for the whole trade union movement that truly takes up the struggle for working class emancipation cannot be created in one stroke—we should remember it took William Z. Foster nearly a decade to get the TUEL off the ground and on solid footing. It will take us leading various campaigns against sellout contracts and reactionary leaders, leading unionization drives amongst the unorganized, strengthening ties with existing better groupings like Railroad Workers United, and generally making links with more militants across the country. And it will take considerably growing and strengthening our ranks of professional revolutionaries. That said, with the contacts we have already, we can and must begin laying the foundation by engaging with them in studies of Marxism and labor history, collaborating on organizing campaigns across different unions, and discussing/debating what the program of the organized left-wing of the trade union movement should be in our context. These studies and discussions, if correctly carried out, will enable us to arrive through some struggle at a correct line to unite the advanced elements in the unions around a program of class struggle in the labor movement, a program which goes far beyond the liberal phrase-mongering around an ill-defined “class struggle unionism.”

- i. In this stage, a key task is to engage with and win over, at least to some degree, the activists pouring into the labor movement at present who are interested in Marxism. This first and foremost requires investigation of these forces, analysis of various contending lines and contradictions among them, and identification of better groups and trends that are part of this relatively recent phenomenon. We must then, in turn, develop a plan and basis of unity around which to unite these forces in the struggle to make abolition of the wages system the watchword of the trade union movement.⁸ Only by understanding these trends and identifying more promising sections can we develop a clear plan to unite the best of these forces.
- b. Second stage: There is a relatively weak Communist (Maoist) Party⁹ leading an organized left-wing opposition in the trade unions that, while growing in influence and strength, is *fully* embraced by only an active minority overall. Hence, at this stage, the organized left-wing will be a “militant minority” type organization (MMO for short) resembling the TUEL. Throughout this stage, the communists’ focus in the trade union movement must be boring-from-within and building this MMO/left opposition in and across the unions while also leading organizing drives of the unorganized, mostly through the existing reactionary unions (usually “dragging them kicking and screaming”).¹⁰ At some points, especially towards the end of this stage, the opportunity *and need* for the CP and organized left-wing to lead the creation of solid independent unions will grow. However, during this stage these independent unions will, for the most part, need to be united fronts with decidedly unreliable and often fairly backward reformists, who will also need to be struggled against while preserving the unity of the new unions as much as possible. One great error of the TUUL (and of the Comintern/Profintern’s instructions) was that they attempted to base the independent unions on too revolutionary a line when conditions were not quite yet ripe for that; this bred both “left”-sectarian isolation *and* right-opportunism.¹¹ So long as the left-wing opposition and the CP are not strong enough to have the new unions *fully* adopt at least the MMO’s program without condemning the new unions to isolation and wrecking the united front that formed them, the MMO must in the main retain its TUEL-like character and not yet transition into a revolutionary trade union center proper, like the TUUL aimed to be.

⁸ “At the same time, and quite apart from the general servitude involved in the wages system, the working class ought not to exaggerate to themselves the ultimate working of these everyday struggles. They ought not to forget that they are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects; that they are retarding the downward movement, but not changing its direction; that they are applying palliatives, not curing the malady. They ought, therefore, not to be exclusively absorbed in these unavoidable guerrilla fights incessantly springing up from the never ceasing encroachments of capital or changes of the market. They ought to understand that, with all the miseries it imposes upon them, the present system simultaneously engenders the *material conditions* and the *social forms* necessary for an economical reconstruction of society. Instead of the conservative motto: “*A fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work!*” they ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword: “*Abolition of the wages system!*”” (*Value, Price, and Profit* by Marx, 1865)

⁹ Or perhaps a relatively strong pre-party organization rapidly approaching its transformation into an actual vanguard Party.

¹⁰ Even now however we must not hesitate to operate in and through smaller independent unions when they exist and have some promise, and later seek to conditionally affiliate with the larger unions, as the Starbucks Workers United have done with SEIU.

¹¹ The TUUL unions sometimes went so far as to actually require adherence to the TUUL’s full revolutionary program in order for a worker to be part of one of its unions. At the same time, this ‘leftism’ was also accompanied by a hefty dose of economism and opportunism: a prominent CPUSA organizer would write in 1931 “in practice when we enter into a strike situation, we look upon it pretty much in the old trade-unionist fashion...the politics we leave pretty much to everybody else,” and an internal 1933 CPUSA report stated that at times “leading comrades [weren’t willing to] bring forward the Party or even explain the revolutionary character” of the TUUL unions.

- i. The MMO will necessarily be a united front for the labor movement. This united front must put forwards some clear lines of demarcation (e.g. fighting to transform the unions into vehicles for the emancipation of labor from capital) without making the basis of unity so narrow that we end up working only with ourselves and our close contacts. But it must also be remembered that the united front is a struggle front; we cannot allow the need for unity to cause us abandon the struggle against various petty-bourgeois and non-proletarian trends that will inevitably crop up in this organization.
 - ii. Moreover, the MMO will be an organization of the relatively advanced members of the trade union movement which is capable, with correct communist leadership, of raising the level of the broad intermediate stratum in the trade unions as well as winning over the backwards. It is a key type of mass organization of the advanced, which helps the Communist Party (or pre-party organization) reach and influence a broad section of the labor movement in a bourgeois democracy.
 - iii. What constitutes the *relatively* advanced/active, the intermediate, and the backward is situation-specific. In the context of the trade union movement taken as a whole—when it is dominated by reactionary leadership that closely collaborates with the bourgeoisie in a million ways to stifle the class struggle—the small number of active are those workers who have come to the conclusion that capitalism must be overthrown and replaced and that the unions must fight the employers as part of that larger fight for the emancipation of the working class from the yoke of capital. They *actively* take up the fight *on that basis* against the reactionary leaders and the employers. We must unite and group around us this active layer of the class in the unions, which in non-revolutionary situations will be a smaller or larger minority depending on the prevailing conditions, *and in all situations, will be larger than the number of communists in the unions.*
 - iv. Once we have a Party, it will be key for the Party to rely on the relatively advanced non-Party elements in the trade union movement in order to win over the bulk of the movement (composed both of the old reactionary unions and any new unions) to revolution, or at least to siding with the revolution when a revolutionary situation arises. Although that situation is far off now, we should see that our work here and now, leading various campaigns, studying with other militants we meet, etc. as part of a larger process of development in this direction.
- c. Third stage: The Communist Party is strong enough to lead vast revolutionary trade unions (some of them new, some of them old unions where the reactionary leadership was driven out) that rival and eventually supersede in size and influence the still existing “yellow” unions. In any remaining reactionary unions with considerable influence, there would still need to be a revolutionary opposition boring from within. At this stage, the MMO transforms into a revolutionary trade union center (RTUC) proper, its membership consisting of revolutionary unions and the revolutionary oppositional groupings within the reactionary unions—basically more or less into what the TUUL (prematurely) aimed to be, and what the Profintern was on an international scale. During this stage, the opposition and the revolutionary unions will need to be working together closely to drive more and more of the remaining

yellow unions (and most importantly of the masses in them) into the revolutionary union center, including through mergers with revolutionary unions. Throughout, the CP will still need to be very flexible and guard against sectarianism; the RTUC will likely need to be a revolutionary united front bringing together whatever non-MLM forces exist in the labor movement that are still capable of playing a revolutionary role, even if later some devolve into an entirely counter-revolutionary force as happened with many syndicalists post-October Revolution.¹² At the same time, the CP cannot tail whatever non-MLM trends it brings together in the RTUC (and also in the MMO during the previous stage) and needs to wage ideological struggle against these trends, for it is essential to win over the vast majority of the most determined revolutionary-minded elements of the class to communism in order to win over the broad masses to at least most of the CP's program in the midst of a revolutionary situation.

¹² Even at its best, the Profintern didn't do the greatest job at being this sort of united front. First, given the strength in many countries of the syndicalists, it did not make sense for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat to be a central part of its program, at least initially. Second, it did not make sense to prohibit dual membership in it and the Amsterdam International, especially given the focus on boring-from-within. It is worth diving deeper into this history however and producing a much more in-depth analysis.