

DOGMATISM AND THE RANK AND FILE MOVEMENT

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It's 6 a.m. Monday morning, you got up too late for your first cup of coffee and you're standing in line at the truck parked in front of your shop to buy a little hot brown water and a piece of rubber called a Danish. Yesterday's union meeting is still fresh in your mind -- yeah, it's going to be another shaft; three more years of worrying about whether or not the kids will get new shoes. If you could only get your hands on that damn Woodcock!

Just as you're about to enter the shop, you're surrounded by about ten people (Good thing it's cold or there'd be even more) with four different newspapers and all of them are telling you about the "sell-out" and about that traitor bureaucrat Woodcock: "The working class must unite to fight the capitalists! Join the new Communist movement!"

It's all as stale as the piece of rubber you're eating for breakfast. Where the hell were they yesterday when you and your friends were shouted down in the meeting? And where were they the last time you walked out without the "bureaucrats" permission, and as a result some of your friends are still walking the streets without a job? How the hell are you going to beat those "bums" by waving newspapers at folks at 6 a.m. on Monday morning?

Indeed, where was the new communist movement this year when about 4.5 million workers were represented in contract negotiations? In November, when the terms of the Ford contract became clear, the anger and frustration of the masses of auto workers rose to a new pitch.

The RCP, claiming to speak for the workers in revolt, called a demonstration of protest in Detroit for noon that day. Only a handful of workers showed up. The Independent Skilled Trades Council, a large rank and file formation based in the skilled trades but trying to reach out to production workers, and at this point totally independent from any communist group, called a demonstration for later that afternoon and at least 2000 workers showed up. The OL, a national communist organization claiming to be on the verge of forming a new communist party, didn't even have the forces to call anything.

We can learn a lot from the events of that day. Clearly the rank and file forces are there and ready -- and if we needed any proof of that the Independent Skilled Trades Council should prove it. However, the Council is plagued by serious weaknesses. Based in the skilled trades, it is

almost entirely white and not only out of contact with the masses of production workers, the majority of whom are Black, but in addition doesn't recognize the central importance of fighting racism in the auto industry and in the UAW. The membership of the Council fails to understand the potential role of national minority and women workers.

What the Independent Skilled Trades Council is missing is class consciousness. What the so-called communist groupings are missing is a concrete understanding of the issues -- and without that they have no following. The entire auto workforce is paying the price of the split in the form of a bankrupt three-year contract.

RANK AND FILE MOVEMENT REMAINS SPONTANEOUS

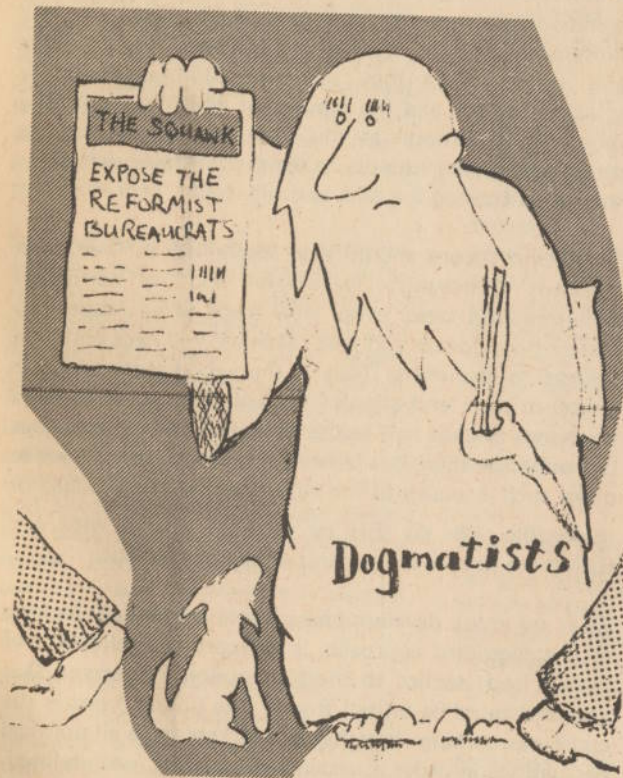
The rank and file movement has been growing by leaps and bounds in the past few years. Primarily organized around contract or election time and focused on a single issue, caucuses tend to die out as quickly as they were formed. The crucial element missing in the majority of these groups is class conscious leadership. The influence of the communist movement has not grown to meet the needs of the spontaneous rank and file rebellion and as a result that revolt remains disorganized, directionless, and impotent. While the Communist Party has become professional in its policy of conciliation with the bureaucrats and tailism behind the rank and file leadership, the sectarianism of the anti-revisionist communist movement has isolated it from the mass of workers.

There is a great deal of talk in all of the new communist movement's press about the importance of building the workers' movement. If one just counts the number of times this is mentioned, one would be very impressed by how seriously these groupings take the task of revolutionizing this movement. Reading a bit more carefully, however, one discovers very quickly that neither the RCP nor the OL for example, ever get beyond vague generalities and abstract polemics when they treat the question.

Neither organization has come forward with a comprehensive treatment of the Trade Union Question, and neither has anything which comes close to a strategic approach to the problems of class-collaborationism in today's unions. Both organizations have shown themselves to be incapable of explaining in any concrete way why the rank and file movement has not developed further, or what should be the main thrusts of class struggle trade unionism in this period.

THREE DOGMATIST ERRORS

The dogmatists make three consistent mistakes in their work in the trade unions. First, they have shown themselves unable to distinguish between middle and right forces, between entrenched bureaucrats and honest but conservative officials, and between opportunist rank and file activists and militant but unconscious leaders. Such an error leads them to label -- in fact, to attack -- all but the most foaming-at-the-mouth "revolutionaries" as sell-outs. In doing this, they seriously offend the bulk of sincere trade unionists who are not only allies but will form the backbone of the new rank and file movement.



Secondly, the dogmatists lack any understanding of the dialectical relationship between the reform struggle and the revolutionary movement, and are characteristically attracted to adventurist behavior -- their proposals often spelling clear disaster to the masses. They have done nothing to develop the class' understanding of the united front work in the trade unions.

Finally, the dogmatists have forgotten that people learn from their experience. It is not enough to lecture the truth and to point the correct direction from afar. The dogmatists have failed to root themselves firmly in the working class movement (which involves much more than just working in a shop). They shun spontaneous rank and file formations in favor of the fightback organizations of the OL or the independent workers' organizations of the RU. They all see the sum total of their work to be the exposure of opposition candidates for their reformism on the one hand, and propaganda for socialism on the other. Their day-to-day trade union work has no focus outside of these goals.

MILLER AND SADLOWSKI: HOW TO VIEW THEM?

The errors of the dogmatists can be most clearly understood when we look at their relationship to two of the most important rank and file rebellions of the period: Miller's challenge to Boyle and to the Boyle forces, and Sadlowski's campaign against Abel. Neither of these rank and file leaders are communists or even very consistent leftists. Both have made serious mistakes with respect to the struggle against racism, and even in the fight for trade union militancy. But what is most important in both of these cases, is that these individuals are only symbols for a massive upsurge of rank and file militancy. Both to a certain extent represent a new kind of democracy to the masses and both are speaking to the real questions facing their constituency.

In both cases, the dogmatists have responded to the movements in a totally undialectical manner. While Miller has clearly shown that his version of reformism is severely limited, the sectarian approach of organizations like the OL has blinded them to the objective realities of the situation in the Miner's Union -- realities like the fact that the Executive Board is still dominated by Boyle supporters, that the union is just recovering from years of intense divisions, that today's problems are the accumulated effects of years of class collaborationism, and that the rank and file movement that elected Miller no longer exists in an organized form. Miller still correctly sees the main danger to the union as coming from the right and incorrectly has chosen to appease this right at the expense of the rank and file movement.

Our attitude must be to extend support to Miller to the extent that he takes steps in the direction of a class struggle program. Our focus must be on trying to build the understanding among the base for the need for consistent class conscious trade union policies. We must be very careful that while we push for more militant leadership that we do not play into the hands of the Boyle forces who are still very strong. We must move the masses around concrete program, building the kind of organization which can force Miller to carry out the thorough reform of the UMW while at the same time defeat the ideas of the right.

Sadlowski is a very similar phenomenon, only a few years later and perhaps as a result, a bit more sophisticated. Again, he is not a class conscious fighter. However, he has committed himself against the sell-out of the ENA, has made a stab at dealing with the need for a concrete struggle against racial discrimination beyond the consent decree, and has committed himself to the development of rank and file democracy in the Steelworkers Union. He has also come out against the anti-communist clause in the constitution, though careful to make clear that he has no ties himself to communism.

He is obviously much stronger around issues that he understands -- the struggle for militant trade unionism and the development of rank and file democracy. However, his slate shows to some extent his understanding of the need to develop unity within the workforce -- it is representative of the multi-national workforce as well as the various job categories within the union. And most important of all, his campaign has drawn behind it a powerful rank and file following, which has come together in the beginnings of a real rank and file organization. It is in this organization that one will find the advanced workers of the Steelworkers Union.

What has been the attitude of the left to these groupings? The CP has played out the tailism implicit in its revisionist political line. It has maintained an almost completely uncritical support of both Miller and Sadlowski. There is practically no mention of the weaknesses of either leader or of their programs in the Daily World, nor does there seem to be any attempt to influence these rank and file movements away from their reformism and towards class struggle unionism.

On the other hand, the dogmatists have gone to the other extreme. The OL, for instance, at first supported the Miller forces almost uncritically. But very soon they were disillusioned by what they hoped would be the great knight in shining armor, and screamed hysterically against this sell-out. They chose this year's convention to propagandize against the so-called Miller brand of sell-out-ism, effectively denying that there could be any difference between Miller and the Boyle forces. The net effect of their actions was necessarily to push Miller into the arms of the right.

When the rank and file desperately needed the kind of leadership which would show them how to pursue the struggle within the union and which would tie Miller directly to the forces which he was elected to represent, the dogmatists washed their hands of a difficult situation and shouted revolution from the rooftops.

This error is being repeated around Sadlowski, but this time in an even more acute form. The OL said on Aug. 9 that "Sادلowski's opposition to Abel in no way promises any real significant changes in the USWA because it, like Abel's is based on reformism and big business unionism rather than class struggle." Earlier they say that "Sادلowski in the USWA and especially the revisionist CP have latched onto and even developed caucuses as instruments for derailing and suppressing the genuine rank and file rebellion at the same time that they promote themselves into positions in the trade union bureaucracy." In other words, they reduce Sadlowski to an opportunist whose whole rebellion has been geared for the sole purpose of getting himself a cozy job. The absurdity of this argument should be obvious.

But what about linking Sadlowski with Abel as essentially two sides of the same coin? This too is patently absurd. While Abel stands for the ENA, appointed positions within the union, and physical and verbal intimidation of all opposition, Sadlowski has opposed the ENA a

as being diametrically opposed to what a labor agreement should be, has favored the 6-hour day and outlawing layoffs contractually, and has demanded the ratification of all contracts. Finally, while Abel only recently added the first Black officer to his white and racist leadership team, and this only in the face of the Sadlowski challenge, Sadlowski's running team is multi-national.

DOGMATISM ISOLATES COMMUNISTS FROM WORKERS' MOVEMENT

The net effect of the errors of the OL, errors which are reflected a thousand-fold in national as well as local situations by dogmatists of all stripes, is to isolate the communists from the real and viable rank and file movement. The OL has lost its influence even in shops and unions where they still have cadre working. By attacking a rank and file movement which is admittedly reformist in outlook at this time, the dogmatists are objectively giving support to the present bureaucracies -- they are attacking the rank and file itself.

Their own theory should have explained to them that without communist leadership and a consistent well-organized base, every new trade union leader, no matter how honest and well-meaning, will necessarily be pushed to the right. That is the very nature of trade unionism pure and simple! The solution is not to wash our hands of each new leader because he or she plays out our understanding, but rather to create the conditions to make such a swing to the right much more difficult or impossible. We do this by working closely with and within the reform movements within the unions.

What we must develop, and what is completely lacking in the dogmatist approach, is the correct application of united front tactics to the trade union movement. Our caucuses must be united fronts. The united front is the conscious coming together of workers from all political persuasions in order to accomplish specific, well-defined, partial goals. The united front does not demand unity of political belief, nor does it necessarily demand unity of motives. A united front is a principled agreement to act together to accomplish a specific goal dictated by the urgent demands of the masses.

The emphasis is clearly on *action*, because we recognize that the working class must learn the lessons of the class struggle through its own experience. It is in the process of leading and interpreting the reform struggle that communists teach the masses the lessons of Marxism-Leninism. Our only requirements are that the program of the united front clearly lead the working class a step forward towards its emancipation and speak to the immediate felt needs of the masses.

The future of the trade union movement depends on the development of this united front, the left-center alliance. Communists have the special responsibility of providing the glue which holds the alliance together. This glue comes in the form of concrete and politically correct program.