

Chicago Trade Union Conference

The conference held in Chicago by the Chicago Trade Union Division of SANE was an important development. It was attended by some 350 unionists, the majority paid officials. The conference was open to active members as well and included a number of stewards, committeemen and active members with real standing in their unions. It was not a conference dominated by any organized radical tendency or tendencies.

All present attended as individuals, but the unions most heavily represented were (in order) the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen, the UAW, the United Packinghouse Workers, and the Steelworkers. It was clear that the Amalgamated Clothing Workers had given this meeting the nod from the top. Frank Rosenblum, Secretary-Treasurer of the International, and Murray Finley, manager of the Chicago Joint Board were opening speaker and chairman of the conference respectively. It was also clear that some clearance had been given by UAW tops, since UAW and Industrial Union Dept. officials (from the UAW) played prominent roles in the conference. It was fairly obvious that at least half a wink in the same direction had also been given by higher ups in the other unions heavily represented.

A large number of the officials attending were from those sections of the AFL-CIO which had been absorbed from Farm Equipment (into the UAW) and the Fur Workers (into the Meat Cutters).

The conference was called around a very moderate program; to encourage a "dialogue on the question of peace" within the union movement. The final resolution on Vietnam which was adopted was the SANE position. This section had been written before the conference, was not discussed when presented, and there was never any doubt it was cut and dried.

But the discussion, where it was scheduled, was not cut and dried. On the war itself, the withdrawal position was obviously most popular. In addition the discussion rapidly got into trade union problems as connected with the war -- threats against the right to strike, higher taxes, wage guidelines, lack of social welfare funds, the draft hitting sons of unionists, Meany's racism and the racist character of the war, etc. In spite of the attempt of the chairmen of the workshops to stay off the subject, much talk occurred about changing the AFL-CIO leadership, and Meany was called a scab more than once. The question of political action was discussed with much soul searching and even the answer of a labor party was raised. It was clear that a mere "dialogue" on the Vietnam war opened up a profound process even among these secondary paid officials.

The higher UAW officials present kept declaring that what they were interested in was not a "revolt" but a change in top AFL-CIO policy toward "more flexibility" in the international affairs department and toward "free speech" in AFL-CIO councils. They sharply criticized by name Jay Lovestone, Meany's chief advisor on international affairs.

The final resolution of the conference contained, in addition to the SANE position on Vietnam, some important points: It urged other such conferences across the country leading to a national conference. It declared: "We plan to carry the discussion of these and other issues of peace and war to our trade union brothers, to the members of our unions, and to all our fellow Americans."

It would be a mistake to apply the same criteria to this conference and others like it that might be applied to SANE activities in other areas. Reportedly, this conference was not originated by SANE, but by certain trade unionists with one foot in the antiwar movement who chose SANE as the vehicle which they thought could open doors at the initial stage. In any case, the logic of the development of such formations as this conference is very different from the logic of the development of "peace groups" in SANE's usual middle class habitat.

It would be a mistake to judge this development -- and similar conferences elsewhere -- simply by the formal SANE position that is insisted upon by the more conservative union officials involved (and which is perfectly o.k. with the CP). The important thing to note, and to act on, is the opening of a discussion on the Vietnam war question within the unions. We have everything to gain by encouraging, and becoming an active part of this process. For one thing, the Vietnam war issue is acting as a catalyst for radicalization in more ways than one, and basic trade union issues are bound to be involved. For another, it is an opportunity to get into contact and into political discussion with militants, particularly young workers, in the unions who will show an interest in discussing the war, getting the facts, and spreading them around.

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