

POLITICAL COMMITTEE MINUTES, No. 4, April 18, 1969

Present: Halstead, Kerry, Breitman, Dobbs, Novack, Shaw

Visitors: Horowitz, Seigle

Chairman: Halstead

- AGENDA:
1. National Committee Vacancy
 2. Fort Jackson Case
 3. Antiwar Conference
 4. Standard Oil Boycott
 5. Black Caucuses in the Unions
 6. Preconvention Discussion

1. NATIONAL COMMITTEE VACANCY

Motion: To notify Comrade Pearl Chertov that as number one alternate, she is automatically elevated to regular membership on the National Committee to fill the vacancy created by the death of Comrade Bea Hansen.

Carried.

2. FORT JACKSON CASE

Seigle reported. (See report mailed from SWP NO 4/17/69)

3. ANTIWAR CONFERENCE

Horowitz reported. (See antiwar report by Horowitz dated 4/16/69)

4. STANDARD OIL BOYCOTT

Kerry amplified report published in The Militant, 4/18/69.

5. BLACK CAUCUSES IN THE UNIONS

Dobbs reported on the memorandum drafted on this question, the purpose of which is to make a preliminary appraisal of black caucuses in the unions. He proposed to circulate the memorandum to NC members only to stimulate thinking on this question.

Motion: To approve the general line of the memorandum (see attached).

Carried.

6. PRECONVENTION DISCUSSION

Breitman reported information on when our movement in the past had carried out part of the preconvention discussion in the press and suggested that the comrades think about the possibility of similarly publishing some parts of the upcoming preconvention discussion material.

Meeting adjourned.

FOR NO INFORMATION ONLY

Memorandum on Black Caucuses in the Trade Unions

1. Black caucuses in relation to changing moods in the working class.

Rebellious moods are developing within this country that tend to undermine the stability of capitalist rule. The trend is manifested by the black power struggle, by the extensive student dissent, by the unprecedented antiwar movement and by mounting unrest among working people.

Within the trade unions objective necessity is impelling the ranks toward class struggle methods in defense of their interests. This is causing the hidebound union bureaucrats to fumble and stumble from crisis to crisis and their policies only serve to aggravate the internal union situation.

As a result new oppositional formations are appearing in the trade unions. At present these groupings tend to be relatively unstable, often tending to exist only temporarily but they also tend to be recurrent. On the whole they are limited in programmatic outlook, lacking in experience, not yet firmly led and generally unable to become consolidated.

A key fact remains, however, that such oppositional formations keep cropping up. The process is tending to deepen within individual unions and it has begun to spread throughout the unions generally. Of special significance is the big new boost the trend is receiving through the rise of black caucuses in the unions.

The record of the union bureaucrats regarding black workers is a sorry one. They follow the liberal-capitalist line of tokenism and gradualism, both on the job and within the unions. This policy has in fact been a key reason for the failure of the unions to really organize workers in the South.

With the union bureaucrats defaulting on issues touching vital needs of black workers, these victims of super-exploitation are taking matters into their own hands. A major consequence has been the present rise of black caucuses in the trade unions, which adds a new dimension to the black power trend. This is a progressive step based on the black workers' right to defend their interests through self-organization, the determination of their own program and the selection of their own leaders.

Black caucuses tend to go beyond the usual main objective of other and earlier caucus formations in the unions, i.e., the winning of union office. While this has been a subsidiary aspect of the perspectives set by black caucuses, their primary activity has tended to center on day-by-day struggles over gut issues. They are linking their fight in the unions with the basic aims of the black community. In doing so they combine economic and social

issues in a manner that returns to the promise of the early CIO. That outlook, which is the polar opposite of the racist policy so crassly symbolized by Shanker in the New York teachers union, charts a true course for the union movement as a whole.

As exemplified in auto, the rise of these caucuses reflects the changing weight of black workers in basic industry. There is a proportional increase of blacks on hard production jobs, where they replace white retirees and whites promoted to skilled jobs. The black workers involved are mainly young and in most cases ready for battle. Where one is victimized and the company reaches into the ghetto for a replacement, it will often wind up hiring another fighter. As a body the young black workers are defying the rules and procedures laid down by the union bureaucrats. As part of their fight against racism, they are demanding full rights in the shaping of union policy and in making union decisions.

Conditions on production lines are becoming worse generally. White workers have many grievances of their own against both the company and the union bureaucrats. Initiatives taken by black workers also tend in many respects to serve the class interests of white workers. This flows from a subtle living process in which the democratic demands of blacks become fused with demands they make as workers. The consequent impact within the union tends objectively to counteract race prejudice among whites. The process implies the generation of black and white class unity. That in turn foreshadows the rise of broadening patterns of united opposition to the union bureaucrats. At the same time the efforts of the black militants tend to push the whole oppositional development in the direction of class struggle concepts.

The dual role played by black workers can be expected to rise to a still higher plane. It entails more than a progressive struggle for their democratic rights as blacks. Their fight also represents a new, vital form of working class initiative, emanating from the most militant sector of the class. In their dual role, as blacks and as workers, these militants will inject new anti-capitalist dimensions into labor struggles at the trade union level. That in turn will help to impel the union ranks toward class political consciousness.

2. Black caucuses in relation to the labor party question.

Although their basic problems are political in character, the workers have yet to exhaust their efforts to find a solution through trade union methods alone. It should also be noted, however, that changing objective conditions are preparing the workers for a leap in class political consciousness. This is implicit in the growing recognition in the ranks that the unions face a grave crisis of leadership and in the fact that a search has begun for better leaders and more effective means of struggle in defense of the workers' class interests.

There is a growing rank and file demand for full use of the union power in open battle with the capitalists. Implicit in the trend is intensified government intervention on the side of the bosses. Consequent experiences will teach the workers rich lessons about the true role of the capitalist government in the class struggle and about the antilabor character of all capitalist politicians. That in turn will impel working class sentiment in an anti-capitalist direction.

The process will be helped along in two respects by the present black power trends. One aspect is the impact of black caucuses within the trade unions. Another is the impulses toward independent black political action within militant sectors of the black movement as a whole. With black militants coming to the fore inside the trade unions, even the present gestations in the direction of independent black political action are bound to have a certain impact on political thought within the union ranks generally. Insofar as independent black political action becomes a reality the process will be helped along that much more. Significant growth of an independent black party in opposition to the capitalist parties, in turn, would tend to undermine and could eventually shatter the present broad coalition on which the Democratic Party is based. With such a development labor as a whole would be thrust in the direction of independent class political action along the labor party road.

While objective conditions are gradually ripening for a labor break with capitalist politics, subjective consciousness of the need for that step still lags badly in the union ranks. Advocacy of an independent labor party is not yet a matter for agitation. It is still a problem of convincing workers of the urgent need to break with all capitalist politicians and form their own party based on the trade unions. That remains primarily a propaganda task.

3. Black caucuses in relation to revolutionary policy in the unions.

In the changing objective situation we can anticipate new openings for party interventions aimed toward building a class struggle left wing in the unions. Openings may sometimes develop under unusual circumstances and at unpredictable times. An example of such a wedge is Reuther's attack on the black caucuses in the UAW. There are deep implications in the UAW bureaucracy's racist reply to the demands of the black workers.

These militants want the union to combat racism; they want it to defend workers against the corporations; and they want rank and file control over union policy. Reuther's racist counterattack not only sows divisions inside the union for the purpose of maintaining his bureaucratic rule. It also spurns demands that touch the vital needs of UAW members generally.

In addition the attack on the black caucuses adds up to a threat against all oppositional formations in the union. A problem is thus posed for white UAW members opposed to Reuther. They have a self-interest in defending the right of blacks to organize a caucus. If they don't, Reuther will be in a position to move also against other oppositional formations in the union. That makes the exercise of racial prejudice a dangerous luxury for white opponents of Reuther. It will cut across their class needs.

An objective basis thus exists for a new trend within the UAW. It implies parallel development of both black caucuses and caucuses composed mainly of white workers. Both types of formations are mutually affected by common class needs. They share a common desire to use the union power against the auto corporations. But to do so they must first wrest control from the hands of the Reuther machine.

These needs impel black and white oppositionists in the UAW toward a search for fraternal collaboration. Such a trend would imply the rise of trade union action to a higher plane. The trend will become manifested first at the industry level and in due course experiences in struggle will impel it into the political sphere.

This concrete example signifies a new opening for us in a key trade union. At present our intervention takes place mainly through our press. In its columns we support the black militants against the Reuther machine. At the same time we seek to educate white militants about the need for unqualified class solidarity with their black brothers in that struggle.

As the situation unfolds we can anticipate new opportunities to extend support to anti-Reuther militants -- both black and white -- in various ways. Out of it all should come an advance in forging a class struggle left wing, in whatever given forms, within the UAW. And implied in this specific development is the opening of comparable opportunities for our party in other trade union situations.

Approved by Political Committee
April 18, 1969