

Revolutionary Strategy & Tactics in the Trade Unions

**Document of the
Democratic Socialist Party**

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Introduction

By Doug Lorimer

This pamphlet contains a resolution adopted by the Democratic Socialist Party at its 9th National Conference, held near Sydney from January 5-11, 1983.

At the time the resolution was adopted the DSP — then called the Socialist Workers Party — was affiliated to the Fourth International, the international revolutionary organisation founded by Leon Trotsky and his supporters in 1938. In August 1985 the DSP ended this affiliation. For an explanation of why the party took this decision readers are referred to the pamphlet, *The Socialist Workers Party and the Fourth International* by Jim Percy and Doug Lorimer.

* * *

At its 7th National Conference in January 1979 the party decided on a tactical reorientation aimed at getting the great majority of its members into basic industry as quickly as possible. At the time the majority of DSP members were either students or workers employed in the commercial and services sectors (bank workers, clerical workers, public servants, teachers, nurses, etc.).

The “turn” to basic industry was predicated upon the expectation that the capitalists’ austerity drive and the rising union resistance to it in the late 1970s would lead to a general radicalisation of the working class and to militant labour struggles in which the workers in basic industry (mining, manufacturing, transport, and energy production) would play the leading role. However, while there was an upsurge of labour struggles in the early 1980s which was spearheaded by the unions in basic industry, following the election of the ALP into federal government in March 1983 the trade union bureaucracy successfully demobilised the labour movement as its part of the wage-cutting ALP-ACTU Accord. Under the impact of the speculation-driven cyclical boom following the 1980-82 international capitalist recession, the class-collaborationist policies of the

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ACTU achieved almost total hegemony within the unions, leading to a massive ideological and organisational retreat by the union movement (with union membership falling from 50% to 35% of the workforce between 1983 and 1994).

In this context, political radicalisation and struggles against the capitalist austerity drive tended to be expressed outside the framework of workplaces and the trade unions. Taking account of these developments, by the mid-1980s the DSP abandoned the perspective of centring its political work in basic industry and directed its activity toward the newly radicalising youth on the campuses and high schools.

Today, while these remain the most fruitful arenas for socialist political activity, new opportunities for revolutionary work are beginning to open up within the trade unions as a result of the emergence of a new generation of union leaders who are prepared to respond positively to their members' discontent at the ACTU bureaucracy's collaboration with the employers' austerity drive.

* * *

In 1983 the DSP held to the view — reflected in the final section of this resolution — that the Australian Labor Party was a “bourgeois workers' party”, i.e., that it was a dual class party, working class in composition and support but with a pro-capitalist program. The experience of the first year of the Hawke Labor government — which proved to be every bit as anti-union and anti-working-class in its policies as the Fraser Liberal-National government that preceded it — led the DSP to revise its analysis of the nature of the ALP, to conclude that the ALP is, as Lenin had observed as far back as 1913, “a liberal bourgeois party”. Flowing from this different analysis, the DSP changed its position on the question of unions affiliating to the ALP — advocating that they end this affiliation and throw their support behind the creation of a party that uncompromisingly fights for workers' interests.

The DSP's previous characterisation of the ALP, which it had been inherited from the Trotskyist movement's analysis of social-democratic parties around the world, was based on the determination of the class character of a political party not only by its program — its real aims and the means by which it seeks their attainment — but also by the class composition of its membership and supporters. This approach, however, represents a departure from the Marxist method of analysing social phenomena.

Marxists always approach every social and political question from the point of view of the struggle between social classes, the fundamental driving force of the historical process. The basic conflict in modern society — capitalist society — is, according to Marxism, the conflict between the capitalist employers and the wage workers. Every political party is an organisation constituted to attain political power in order to

implement a program, a definite set of aims and policies which — whether consciously perceived or not — support one side or the other in this basic conflict. Reduced to the simplest terms, the program of the bourgeoisie is the maintenance and defence of the capitalist social order; the program of the proletariat, its overthrow and the construction of a classless, socialist society.

Thus, for Marxists, the class character of a political party is not determined by the class that supports it at any particular time, but by what class *the party supports*, i.e., by the party's program, by its real aims and basic policy. From this point of view, the only correct one for Marxists, the ALP is a not a workers' but a *bourgeois* party.

What distinguishes the ALP from the other bourgeois parties is that it operates as an organised force within the trade unions and other progressive social movements. It consciously orients to subordinating the latter to its program through the recruitment of union officials, militant workers, left-leaning intellectuals and radical social activists. It diverts their energies away from promoting independent political action by channelling them toward the work of organising the election of Labor MPs, into the Sisyphean labour of attempting to reform the ALP into an instrument for radical social change, into the petty machinations of the party's permanent factional squabbling, and by corrupting them into parliamentary careerists.

The ALP's ability to dupe militant workers and left-leaning intellectuals into believing that it is not a capitalist party rests on its formal commitment to the "socialisation of the means of production" and the affiliation of most of the trade unions to it.

While the ALP is committed, on paper, to attaining "socialism", this "aim" has no connection with the actual goals and policies of the Labor Party, which have always been to strengthen the capitalist order in Australia through the implementation of parliamentary reforms aimed at "harmonising" the interests of capital and labour.

The ALP's "socialist objective" has never been anything more than a paper formula, a shibboleth to be admired occasionally and referred to in moments of emotion — "the light on the hill" of the "true believers".

The affiliation of trade unions to the ALP and their formal voting majority at ALP state conferences (which elect the delegates to the ALP's national conference) does not mean that the workers who are members of these unions "control" the ALP or have any real say in its policies. The union representatives to ALP conferences are hand-picked by the union bureaucracy. They are not elected by the union ranks.

Furthermore, while the ALP state and federal conferences are formally the decisive decision-making bodies of the party, the actual dynamics of the ALP make them subordinate bodies. In reality, the entire national and local organisation of the ALP

exists to serve another “party” — the Parliamentary Labor Party. The ALP is simply an electoral machine at the service of the Labor parliamentarians, who are not bound to carry out any of the decisions adopted by the ALP’s conferences and who are invariably middle-class careerists — former or current ALP functionaries, union bureaucrats, doctors, lawyers, journalists, small business owners, etc.

The fact that most of the trade unions are affiliated to the ALP has led many socialists to falsely conclude that the Labor Party is the political representative of the, albeit opportunist-led, labour movement or that workers’ support for the ALP represents, even if in a highly distorted manner, an expression of independent working-class politics. Socialists who promote such views are not assisting the working class to find the road to independent working-class political action. On the contrary, they are unwittingly aiding the ALP politicians and union leaders in their efforts to dupe workers into continuing to accept Labor’s class-collaborationist politics. In fact, one sign of workers’ growing discontent with the pro-capitalist policies of the ALP has been the growing opposition to their unions’ affiliation to the Labor Party, opposition which has become much more widespread as a result of a decade of Labor government attacks on workers’ wages and conditions.

The DSP’s current perspectives toward the Labor Party are summarised most fully in a resolution on “The ALP and the Fight for Socialism” adopted by its 11th National Conference, held in January 1986, and reprinted in the pamphlet *Labor and the Fight for Socialism* (New Course Publications: Sydney, 1988).

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Revolutionary Strategy & Tactics in the Trade Unions

1. Basic defensive units of the working class

The trade unions were called into existence by capitalism itself, as the elementary defensive reflex of the working class. They express the fact that the fundamental class contradiction of the modern epoch is that between bourgeoisie and proletariat. In the words of the *Communist Manifesto*:

... with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number, it becomes concentrated in great masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more. The various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are more and more equalised, in proportion as machinery obliterates all distinction of labour, and nearly everywhere reduces wages to the same low level. The growing competition among the bourgeoisie, and the resulting commercial crises, make the wages of the worker ever more fluctuating. The unceasing improvement of machinery, ever more rapidly developing, makes their livelihood more and more precarious, the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois takes more and more the character of collision between two classes. Thereupon the workers begin to form combinations (trades unions) against the bourgeoisie; they club together in order to keep up the rate of wages; they found permanent associations in order to make provision beforehand for these occasional revolts. Here and there the contest breaks out into riots.

Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruits of their battles lie, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers ...¹

This initial impulse towards class unity is spontaneous in that it is constantly generated by the working of capitalist economy itself. The inescapable drive of the capitalists to increase their profits at the expense of workers just as inescapably calls forth organised resistance by the working class.

But precisely because their tendency is to embrace the entire workforce, the unions remain primarily defensive organisations, their perspectives necessarily being limited by the stage of consciousness reached by the proletariat as a whole. A century and a half of experience has conclusively demonstrated that unions, on their own, are incapable of going beyond defence of the immediate needs of the working class and waging a consistent struggle for the socialist revolution necessary to meet the historic interests of the proletariat.

Thus the tendency to class unity in trade union organisations is a necessary stage, but not a sufficient one, on the proletariat's road to the transformation of society. To achieve its historic goals, the proletariat requires a revolutionary vanguard party to lead it in struggle. As the *Transitional Program* explains: "Trade unions do not offer and, in line with their task, composition, and manner of recruiting membership, cannot offer a finished revolutionary program; in consequence, they cannot replace the *party*."²

Moreover, while the fundamental tendency of capitalism, outlined in the *Communist Manifesto*, is to equalise the interests and conditions of life within the proletariat, capitalist society also, particularly within the imperialist countries, creates subsidiary divisions within the working class that counteract the tendency towards unity. In the absence of a conscious revolutionary leadership — the vanguard party — these secondary divisions prevent or disrupt full working-class unity even at the level of trade union organisation.

2. The labour aristocracy & the union bureaucracy

The bourgeoisie consciously seeks to foster racial, national, sexual, and age divisions within the working class. Particular layers of the proletariat can also be singled out on craft lines for relatively favoured treatment. The very spontaneism of union organisation strengthens the conscious schemes of the class enemy. Because different sectors of the working class are impelled to struggle at different times and in different circumstances, the extent and form of trade union organisation varies widely. Precisely because workers in the same trade are the most equalised in interests and conditions of life, the original impulse towards unionisation often takes the form of craft unions; craft unionism can in turn become an obstacle to the necessary further development of unity of organisation and action.

Moreover, with the development of imperialism and the superprofits it obtained, the ruling classes of the developed capitalist countries were able to convert some of the accidental differences between sectors of the working class into more long-lasting divisions. A layer of the working class, generally one that had through past struggles won a relatively favoured situation compared to the rest of the class, was converted

into a base of support for the continued rule of capital. An aristocracy of labour was fostered as a means of dividing and misleading the proletariat as a whole.

The special privileges in the form of a higher living standard granted to the labour aristocracy give it a consciousness of group interests opposed to those of the proletariat as a whole. It seeks to preserve its privileges through collaboration with the employers and their state. Lenin, in his “Theses on the Fundamental Tasks of the Second Congress of the Communist International”, outlined the origin and role of this layer:

One of the chief causes hampering the revolutionary working-class movement in the developed capitalist countries is the fact that because of their colonial possessions and the super-profits gained by finance capital, etc., the capitalists of these countries have been able to create a relatively larger and more stable labour aristocracy, a section which comprises a small minority of the working class. This minority enjoys better terms of employment and is imbued with a narrow-minded craft spirit and with petty-bourgeois and imperialist prejudices. It forms the real social pillar of the Second International, of the reformists and the centrists; at present it might even be called the social mainstay of the bourgeoisie. No preparation of the proletariat for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie is possible, even in the preliminary sense, unless an immediate, systematic, extensive and open struggle is waged against this stratum ...³

The conservative outlook of the labour aristocracy, ultimately based on material privilege, is constantly reinforced by capitalist ideology. The capitalist propaganda extolling “cooperation”, “national unity”, “give and take”, “using proper channels” etc. is designed to persuade both the labour aristocracy and the proletariat as a whole that the aristocracy’s material wellbeing is a natural and just reward for submission to the interests of capitalism. In this way, the bourgeoisie seeks to promote the labour aristocracy and its class-collaborationist practice as models that the entire working class aspires to follow.

It is the labour aristocracy that forms the primary social base for the entrenched bureaucracies that control most unions in Australia and other imperialist countries. But the labour aristocracy is only *relatively* privileged; it remains exploited through the sale of its labour-power at a price lower than the value its labour creates. Furthermore, it is a small minority of the proletariat as a whole.

Important in reinforcing the bureaucracy of the Australian labour movement formed more than a century ago was the long capitalist boom following World War II and the imperialist superexploitation of the colonies and semicolonies. These factors enabled the ruling class to grant the proletariat a steadily rising standard of living and thus created a climate favouring the generalisation of class-collaborationist attitudes. Conservative union leaderships appeared able to deliver an increasing level of material

wellbeing through polite bargaining with the capitalists and reliance on the “good will” of the capitalist state, particularly the arbitration system.

In these circumstances, the majority of the working class did not fight against conservative officials consolidating their hold on the unions. Militant, class-struggle methods of advancing workers’ interests appeared as an unnecessary disruption of a system in which workers’ reasonable demands would be met in the natural course of things, if not immediately then at least within the foreseeable future. Cold War propaganda reinforced this attitude by identifying trade union militancy with a mythical military threat from the Soviet Union or China.

The capitalist state helped to consolidate the most privileged and conservative layers of the working class into a hardened bureaucracy by distributing economic and political favours to those who most distinguished themselves in servility. This of course was not a new process. Lenin described the similar phenomenon in the pre-1914 period this way:

... The important thing is that, economically, the desertion of a stratum of the labour aristocracy to the bourgeoisie has matured and become an accomplished fact; and this economic fact, this shift in class relations, will find political form, in one shape or another, without any particular “difficulty”.

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, 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”.⁴

The influence of the petty bourgeoisie also serves to encourage class-collaborationist attitudes and thus to provide support for the trade union bureaucracy. Ruined small businesspeople forced into the proletariat often bring with them the petty bourgeoisie’s instinctive hatred and fear of the class struggle. Subcontracting and the existence of a continuum beginning with workers who provide their own tools and passing over into petty-bourgeois and even medium or large-scale capitalists obscure class lines and provide a rich medium for the growth of class-collaborationist ideas. Particular layers of the petty bourgeoisie, such as lawyers, are able to obtain considerable direct influence within the labour movement due to the capitalist state’s legislation concerning trade unions, working conditions, etc.

Thus the bureaucracy of the unions emerges as both a product of and a reinforcement for the objective factors of capitalist society that push the proletariat towards conservatism and submission to the ideas of the class enemy. In confrontations between workers and capitalists, the bureaucracy acts more as a mediator than as a representative of the workers. The bureaucrats are the fundamental obstacle to consistent class struggle by the unions, and therefore to the winning of even the immediate, day-to-day demands of the working class.

The bureaucrats' role helps to maintain conservatism in the ranks of the unions even after the elimination of the economic circumstances that gave birth to that conservatism. The refusal of the bureaucrats to lead a consistent struggle, or any struggle at all, against the capitalists can convince many in the ranks of the union that it is pointless to fight the employers, since any such effort is certain to be sabotaged or betrayed by the union officialdom. And the bureaucracy's concern with its own welfare at the expense of the membership's, including its use of anti-democratic methods to maintain control, encourages acceptance of the capitalists' anti-union propaganda by less conscious layers of the working class. Leon Trotsky summarised the relationship between the bureaucracy and "conservative" workers:

The masses are better, more daring, more resolute than the leaders. The masses wish to struggle. Putting the brakes on the struggle are the leaders who have lagged behind the masses. Their own indecisiveness, their own conservatism, their own bourgeois prejudices are disguised by the leaders with allusions to the backwardness of the masses. Such is the true state of affairs at present.⁵

3. The labour bureaucracy & the class struggle

The bureaucracy is a social layer separate and distinct from the working class. It enjoys a higher standard of living, a secure position, and social privileges not available to ordinary workers. It shares the ideological outlook of the classical petty bourgeoisie — shopkeepers, small farmers, etc., — of desiring class peace and seeking to harmonise the interests of labour and capital, which means in reality supporting the capitalist status quo. Furthermore, the trade union bureaucracy in Australia is part of a larger formation extending into the ALP. The latter wing of the bureaucracy takes direct responsibility for administering the capitalist state when called upon to do so by the bourgeoisie.

Of course, not every union official is part of the bureaucracy. Being elected to union posts does not automatically force workers to adopt the outlook of another class, particularly at the lower levels of the union apparatus, where officials' incomes remain close to those of the union membership. The unions cannot function without

an apparatus and officials. The question is whose interests these officials are to serve — those of the workers, or their own distinct interests, and through attempting to do that the interests of capital? But it is also true that the Australian trade union movement today is dominated by the bureaucracy. This bureaucracy exerts great pressure on officials who want to make the unions serve the proletariat. If class-struggle militants elected to union posts are to withstand this pressure for any length of time, they need the revolutionary perspective that can be supplied only by a Marxist party.

The rule of the bureaucrats contradicts the class character of the unions as fighting organisations of the proletariat. For the unions remain the elemental vehicle of the proletariat's class struggle. They are the organisations to which workers turn almost instinctively when their interests are threatened on the job. Any period of heightened class conflict normally produces a surge of new members into the unions, despite all the obstacles that the bureaucracy places in their way.

In struggles between unions and capitalists, the bureaucrats stand in an intermediate position. Their power and material wellbeing derive from their posts in these proletarian organisations; but in political outlook and conditions of life they stand much closer to the bourgeoisie than to the working class.

The bureaucracy acts as a transmission belt, not an independent force, in the struggle between the two fundamental classes. Under conditions of capitalist attack on the unions and determination to struggle by the ranks, sections of the bureaucracy can be forced to implement class-struggle measures, although generally only in a distorted and inadequate form. The lower levels of the bureaucracy, which are closer to the ranks and less secure in their posts, are more susceptible to such pressures.

The bureaucracy is far more effective as a transmission belt carrying capitalist influence into the working class. This it does not only in periods of intensified struggle but also in periods of relative quiescence. It is the bureaucracy that constantly seeks to tie the unions to the institutions of the bourgeois state, that replaces the struggle of workers with negotiation and “compromise” with the capitalists, that seeks to conclude every struggle at the earliest possible moment.

Writing of the British labour bureaucracy, Leon Trotsky provided a description of its role that is in broad outline applicable also to the role of the bureaucracy in Australia and other imperialist countries:

The trade unions were formed during the period of the growth and rise of capitalism. They had as their task the raising of the material and cultural level of the proletariat and the extension of its political rights. This work, which in England lasted over a century, gave the trade unions tremendous authority among the workers. The decay of British capitalism, under the conditions of decline of the world capitalist system, undermined

the basis for the reformist work of the trade unions. Capitalism can continue to maintain itself only by lowering the standard of living of the working class. Under these conditions trade unions can either transform themselves into revolutionary organisations or become lieutenants of capital in the intensified exploitation of the workers. The trade union bureaucracy, which has satisfactorily solved its own social problem, took the second path. It turned all the accumulated authority of the trade unions against the socialist revolution and even against any attempts of the workers to resist the attacks of capital and reaction.

From that point on, the most important task of the revolutionary party became the liberation of the workers from the reactionary influence of the trade union bureaucracy...⁶

But this task is not, of course, an end in itself. The proletariat must be liberated from the reactionary influence of the bureaucracy for a specific reason: so that it can carry out an effective fight against the class enemy.

Revolutionary strategy and tactics in the unions must proceed from the understanding that the main enemy is the capitalists. The influence of the bureaucracy must be destroyed because the bureaucrats are agents of this enemy. Conversely, it is militant struggles against the class enemy that are most effective in exposing the cowardice and treachery of the bureaucrats and thus destroying their influence.

A perspective that allows the fight against the union bureaucracy to outweigh the fight against the class enemy is in the final analysis only a variety of left bureaucratism. Such an outlook falsely presupposes that the needs of the proletariat can be satisfied merely through the replacement of the present officials with others who are more militant, tactically astute, etc. It thus implicitly accepts the indefinite continuation of capitalist rule and minimises the need for consistent mobilisation of the ranks in struggle against the bourgeoisie. That a strategy of fighting the bureaucrats instead of the bourgeoisie is inherently a reformist accommodation with bureaucratism is illustrated by the course of the Rank and File officialdom in the Port Kembla branch of the Federated Ironworkers Association, which in the present recession has made itself indistinguishable from the right-wing bureaucracy.

4. The bureaucracy & the revolutionary party

The trade union bureaucracy represents a tremendous obstacle to the development of proletarian class consciousness and the class struggle. As Trotsky put it: "If there were not a bureaucracy of the trade unions, then the police, the army, the courts, the lords, the monarchy would appear before the proletarian masses as nothing but pitiful and ridiculous playthings."⁷

At the same time, the bureaucracy is an extremely narrow layer. And it is weak in that it lacks the stable base provided by a necessary relationship to the means of production, was brought into existence by economic circumstances that are increasingly abnormal and exceptional, and can maintain its influence only through widespread false consciousness in the ranks of the unions.

Either or both of these aspects of the bureaucracy — its power and its weakness — can mislead revolutionaries onto the false path of attempting to bypass the bureaucracy through artificial organisational means, such as the setting up of “revolutionary” unions, without first confronting and defeating the bureaucrats on their own grounds. Such artificial methods cannot overcome the problem of the bureaucracy, for even in revolutionary periods large numbers of workers turn first of all to the old established unions as their vehicle for struggle. For this reason the theses on “The Trade-Union Movement, Factory Committees and the Third International”, adopted by the Second Congress of the Comintern, instructed communists that they must seek all methods to fight the bureaucracy within the existing unions:

Large numbers of workers, are pouring into the trade unions and the economic struggle which the unions are waging against the wishes of the bureaucracy is assuming a revolutionary character. The communists in all countries must join the unions in order to develop them into bodies consciously struggling for the overthrow of capitalism and the creation of communism. They must take the initiative in creating trade unions where none exist. Voluntary withdrawals from the union movement and artificial attempts to create special unions — unless made necessary by exceptional acts of violence on the part of the union bureaucracy (such as the dissolution of revolutionary local union sections by the opportunist centres), or by its adopting a narrow, exclusionist policy of closing the organisation to the broad masses of less skilled workers — these represent a great danger to the communist movement. Such actions threaten to isolate the most politically advanced and class-conscious workers from the masses who are sympathetic to communist ideas; they threaten to leave the masses to their opportunist leaders, thus playing into the hands of the bourgeoisie ...⁸

Even where revolutionary or class-struggle unions or movements existed — such as the IWW in the United States or the shop stewards’ movement in Britain⁹ — communists were still to work within the bureaucratized unions as well as the class-struggle organisations.

In his report on the resolution, Karl Radek explained:

...the communists’ efforts to organise the broad masses of unskilled workers must not lead them to become isolated from the American Federation of Labor (AFL),¹⁰ from the Anglo-American labour organisations. Through the new organizations we must not

only storm capitalism, we must also join the federation of labour.

In response to this the American comrades say they have been trying to transform the AFL for decades. But this argument is hardly convincing. Insofar as the AFL is concerned, workers always went into the unions with the good intention of taking up arms immediately. But not all the forces that did so were revolutionary. And do not forget that all these efforts were made in the epoch of peaceful development, when the workers in Britain and America were unable to conceive of revolution at all.

Now the AFL itself is undergoing a transformation.¹¹

It is just because the bureaucracy is *not yet* defeated that workers entering into struggle seek to do so through the existing, bureaucratised organisations. Thus these unions, especially in basic industry, remain central to the class struggle in its present stage.

The bureaucracy cannot be bypassed through artificial organisational methods, nor will it disappear spontaneously in the course of the class struggle, without the conscious intervention of a revolutionary party. Our Seventh National Conference in January 1979 therefore correctly decided to base the party in the industrial working class. This turn was based on an understanding of the necessity for revolutionaries to take their program to the working class in its mass organisations and on an analysis of objective conditions which saw that it was both necessary and possible to begin the struggle against the bureaucracy for influence over the union ranks.

The industrial working class is the main arena of work for the revolutionary party in Australia today. As the most powerful section of the proletariat, the industrial working class will have to play the leading role in the struggle against the class enemy. And it follows from this that the industrial working class is also decisive in destroying the influence of the trade union bureaucracy. While it is quite possible and even probable that sectors of the bureaucracy will be defeated in the non-industrial unions before such victories are achieved in the industrial trade unions, consistent class-struggle unionism cannot exist without including the strongest sections of the class.

To stand back from beginning the struggle to make the unions of the industrial working class effective instruments against the capitalists would have meant choosing a path that ultimately leads to transforming the revolutionary party into a sterile sect.

The task now before the party is to continue the process of deepening our involvement in the daily life and concerns of the industrial proletariat and winning political influence among our fellow workers. This process involves a number of aspects.

The party as a whole and its individual cadres seek constantly to learn from the experiences of the proletariat through participation in its daily struggles. The party's cadres are trained theoretically and practically to become leaders of the unions in the

fight for socialism.

We seek to explain to our fellow workers the socialist solution to the economic crisis, to the problems that confront them on and off the job, to the threat of imperialist war, and to all major social problems. On the basis of the Marxist program, we recruit to the party the most class-conscious and militant elements, paying particular attention to the most combative and oppressed sections of the proletariat, such as women, migrants, and youth.

The party steeps itself in the life of the unions in order to strengthen them for struggle, in the spirit of the *Transitional Program*:

The Bolshevik-Leninist stands in the frontline trenches of all kinds of struggles, even when they involve only the most modest material interests or democratic rights of the working class. He takes active part in mass trade unions for the purpose of strengthening them and raising their spirit of militancy. He fights uncompromisingly against any attempt to subordinate the unions to the bourgeois state and bind the proletariat to “compulsory arbitration” and every other form of police guardianship — not only fascist but also “democratic”. Only on the basis of such work within the trade unions is successful struggle possible against the reformists, including those of the Stalinist bureaucracy...¹²

5. The unity of economic & political struggles

There are only two real alternatives that face the unions in this period of the death agony of capitalism, of confrontation between imperialism and the world revolution. Leon Trotsky summarised these alternatives:

... the trade unions in the present epoch cannot simply be the organs of democracy as they were in the epoch of free capitalism and they cannot any longer remain politically neutral, that is, limit themselves to, serving the daily needs of the working class. They cannot, any longer be anarchistic, i.e., ignore the decisive influence of the state on the life of people and classes. They can no longer be reformist, because the objective conditions leave no room for any serious and lasting reforms. The trade unions of our time can either serve as secondary instruments of imperialist capitalism for the subordination and disciplining of workers and for obstructing the revolution, or, on the contrary, the trade unions can become the instruments of the revolutionary movement of the proletariat.¹³

The trade unions in Australia today are clearly much closer to the first alternative. Marxist strategy and tactics must serve to transform them into instruments of the revolutionary movement of the proletariat. This involves two interrelated tasks.

The unions must be politicised, or taught to think socially and act politically. That

is, the unions have to intervene in all the big political issues of the day on the side of all the exploited and oppressed. They have to confront the class enemy on the arena of state and government as well as in the workplace.

At the same time, the unions have to become effective instruments for defending and advancing the immediate needs of their members and the proletariat as a whole, which means adopting class-struggle methods of mobilising the ranks to fight in their own interests.

An effective fight for the immediate needs of the class and the politicisation of the unions — the fight for the longer-term interests of the proletariat — have to be combined. Emphasis on one to the exclusion of the other leads to errors that contradict the goals of revolutionary strategy in the unions. Overemphasis on the immediate needs of the class and the downplaying of its historic interests is a definition of opportunism; ultimately it means that not even the immediate needs can be adequately defended. Concentration on the historic tasks of the proletariat separated from its immediate needs is the characteristic vice of sectarianism, which cannot show the way to the future because it is incapable of dealing with the present.

At times within the revolutionary movement this distinction between immediate and historic needs of the proletariat has appeared as a distinction between “economic” and “political” struggles, even though the proletariat does have immediate political needs and longterm economic needs. Whatever the labels used for this distinction, the point is that the two sides must not be counterposed. They are not mutually exclusive alternatives, but interlocked parts of a whole. The immediate or economic needs of the proletariat can be won only as part of a fight for the political or historic interests of the class. The historic, political goals of the proletariat cannot be reached without incorporating the fight for immediate economic needs.

The trade union theses of the Second Congress of the Comintern described the interrelationship of immediate and historic tasks:

... the Communist Party should organise all workers around the issues raised by the economic crisis, and draw them into the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat by extending and deepening the fight they all understand for workers’ control over production.¹⁴

6. The fight for immediate needs

The unions arise as instruments for defending the immediate economic interests of the proletariat, and it is on this basis that they attract new workers into their ranks during times of increasing class conflict. The struggle to transform the unions into revolutionary instruments therefore necessarily incorporates the fight for the immediate

needs of the working class.

Defence of the proletariat's immediate needs is a continuous task, not one that arises only during strikes or industrial disputes. It requires that the party carefully analyse what the most pressing objective needs are, and then develop the demands and proposals that would most effectively meet those needs. The party press and cadres on the job must be able to explain clearly to fellow workers why and how the party's proposals would meet the particular need, as well as the most effective way of fighting for such demands.

Naturally, such an approach must not contain even the slightest hint of ultimatism. The party cannot seek to issue orders to the ranks of the unions or refuse to support any demand of the proletariat, however limited, that is capable of helping to solve any problem confronting the class. It would be hopeless sectarianism, for example, to refuse to join a struggle for higher unemployment benefits on the grounds that some other measure would be more effective in combating unemployment. As Trotsky put it:

Every organisation, every party, every faction which permits itself an ultimatic position in relation to the trade union, i.e., in essence turns its back upon the working class, merely because of displeasure with its organisation, every such organisation is destined to perish. And it must be said it deserves to perish.¹⁵

When the fight for immediate needs leads to strikes or other forms of industrial action, revolutionaries seek to bring to the fore the class-struggle methods that are most likely to bring victories and to increase the class consciousness and self-confidence of the union membership. They urge reliance on the united mass action of the workers rather than the arbitration system or the manoeuvres of the union officialdom. Thus they advocate measures such as control of campaigns by democratic mass meetings rather than by bureaucratically dominated union bodies.

In the epoch of capitalism's death agony, the immediate and historic needs of the proletariat are objectively linked by the exhaustion of capitalism's historically progressive role and its consequent inability to expand the satisfaction of human needs. The subjective link corresponding to this reality is provided by the program of transitional demands, which leads from the struggle for immediate needs to the struggle for a workers' and farmers' government.

Revolutionaries in the trade unions must therefore examine every proposed campaign for immediate demands from the standpoint of whether or not it advances the working class along its historic path to socialist revolution. The trade union bureaucracy has a great deal of experience and skill in presenting measures whose

seeming content is the advancing of the immediate interests of the proletariat but which really serve only to deflect the working class from the road to its historic goals.

In reality, measures that contradict the proletariat's struggle for socialism cannot really advance the immediate interests of the working class, just because immediate and historic needs are objectively and inseparably linked. Projects such as the social contract between the ACTU and an ALP government, which sacrifice the political independence from the capitalist state needed for the proletariat to achieve its historic goals, are equally certain to undermine the defence of immediate needs.

7. Union politics & socialist politics

Decisive steps forward in developing the consciousness of the ranks of the unions will come through political struggles bound up with the proletariat's historic goal of socialist revolution.

Revolutionary strategy for developing political struggle in the trade unions is based on the understanding that union politics does not go beyond reformism without the conscious leadership of a vanguard party.

This understanding, which is deliberately obscured by "left" reformists who pretend that class-collaborationist political projects like a social contract represent a step forward in developing proletarian consciousness, has been part of the arsenal of Marxism since Lenin wrote *What Is To Be Done?*:

... *Rabochaya Mysl* believes ... that "politics always obediently follows economics" (*Rabocheye Dyelo* varies this thesis when it asserts in its program that in Russia more than "in any other country, the economic struggle is inseparable from the political struggle"). If by politics is meant social-democratic politics, then the theses of *Rabochaya Mysl* and *Rabocheye Dyelo* are utterly incorrect. The economic struggle of the workers is very often connected (although not inseparably) with bourgeois politics, clerical politics, etc., as we have seen. *Rabocheye Dyelo's* theses are correct, if by politics is meant trade-union politics, viz., the common striving of all workers to secure from the government measures for alleviating the distress to which their condition gives rise, but which do not abolish that condition, i.e., which do not remove the subjection of labour to capital. That striving indeed is common to the English trade-unionists, who are hostile to socialism, to the Catholic workers, to the "Zubatov" workers, etc. There is politics and politics ...¹⁶

In the same work, Lenin explained that "Social-democracy leads the struggle of the working class, not only for better terms for the sale of labour-power, but for the abolition of the social system that compels the propertyless to sell themselves to the rich. Social-democracy represents the working class, not in its relation to a given group

of employers alone, but in its relation to all classes of modern society and to the state as an organised political force.”¹⁷

Therefore it would be a mistake for socialists to regard the struggle for immediate economic needs as their primary task or even as the necessary starting point in politicising the unions:

... Is it true that, in general, the economic struggle is the most widely applicable means of drawing the masses into the political struggle? It is entirely untrue. *Any and every* manifestation of police tyranny and autocratic outrage, not only in connection with the economic struggle, is not one whit less “widely applicable” as a means of “drawing in” the masses. The rural superintendents and the flogging of peasants, the corruption of the officials and the police treatment of the “common people” in the cities, the fight against the famine-stricken and the suppression of the popular striving towards enlightenment and knowledge, the extortion of taxes and the persecution of the religious sects, the humiliating treatment of soldiers and the barrack methods in the treatment of the students and liberal intellectuals — do all these and a thousand other similar manifestations of tyranny, though not directly connected with the “economic” struggle, represent, in general, *less* “widely applicable” means and occasions for political agitation and for drawing the masses into the political struggle? The very opposite is true. Of the sum-total of cases in which the workers suffer (either on their own account or on account of those closely connected with them) from tyranny, violence, and the lack of rights, undoubtedly only a small minority represent cases of police tyranny in the trade-union struggle as such. Why then should we, beforehand, *restrict* the scope of political agitation by declaring only *one* of the means to be “the most widely applicable”, when social-democrats must have, in addition, other, generally speaking, no less “widely applicable” means?¹⁸

This approach means we should propagandise among our fellow workers on all the important political issues of the day. In the Leninist view, revolutionary politics are distinguished from trade union politics by the former’s subordination of immediate economic goals to the larger struggle for socialism:

Revolutionary Social-Democracy has always included the struggle for reforms as part of its activities. But it utilises economic agitation for the purpose of presenting to the government, not only demands for all sorts of measures, but also (and primarily) the demand that it cease to be an autocratic government. Moreover, it considers it its duty to present this demand to the government on the basis, *not* of the economic struggle *alone*, but of all manifestations in general of public and political life. In a word, it subordinates the struggle for reforms, as the part to the whole, to the revolutionary struggle for freedom and for socialism ...¹⁹

In a well-known passage, Lenin went on to personify the reformist and revolutionary approaches:

... the secretary of any, say English, trade union always helps the workers to carry on the economic struggle, he helps them to expose factory abuses, explains the injustice of the laws and of measures that hamper the freedom to strike and to picket ... explains the partiality of arbitration court judges who belong to the bourgeois classes, etc., etc. In a word, every trade union secretary conducts and helps to conduct “the economic struggle against the employers and the government”. It cannot be too strongly maintained that *this is still not* social-democracy, that the social-democrat’s ideal should not be the trade-union secretary, but the *tribune of the people*, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth *before all* his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for all and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat ...²⁰

Lenin’s theme in this polemic against economism — that the party cannot adapt to the spontaneous trade union consciousness of the proletariat but must develop it into socialist consciousness — was but obliterated by the Stalinist degeneration of the Communist International, being preserved only by the International Left Opposition and the Fourth International. In a 1938 discussion with leaders of the US Socialist Workers Party, Trotsky explained this fundamental point:

... It is a fact that the American working class has a petty-bourgeois spirit, lacks revolutionary solidarity, is used to a high standard of living; and the mentality of the American working class corresponds not to the realities of today but to the memories of yesterday.

Now the situation is radically changed. What can a revolutionary party do in this situation? In the first place give a clear, honest picture of the objective situation, of the historic tasks which flow from this situation, irrespective of whether or not the workers are today ripe for this. Our tasks don’t depend on the mentality of the workers. The task is to develop the mentality of the workers. That is what the program should formulate and present before the advanced workers. Some will say: good, the program is a scientific program; it corresponds to the objective situation — but if the workers won’t accept this program, it will be sterile. Possibly. But this signifies only that the workers will be crushed, since the crisis can’t be solved any other way but by the socialist revolution. If the American worker will not accept the program in time, he will

be forced to accept the program of fascism. And when we appear with our program before the working class, we cannot give any guarantees that they will accept our program. We cannot take responsibility for this ... we can only take the responsibility for ourselves.²¹

8. The class-struggle left wing

The transformation of the unions into instruments of revolutionary struggle will be a process in which growing sections of the working class become conscious of “the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat” and of the methods that are necessary to produce victory in this struggle. These advanced sections of the proletariat will make up the class-struggle left wing needed to mobilise still broader sections of the working class and break the bureaucracy’s stranglehold on the unions.

If it is to achieve this goal, the class-struggle left wing will have to take up repeatedly three major themes or fronts of struggle. These are trade union democracy, class independence, and working-class unity.

In the same way that the struggle against the bureaucracy is not an end in itself but a part of building a more effective fight against the class enemy, so trade union democracy, class independence, and working class unity enter into the task of transforming the unions as necessary parts of removing the shackles that now prevent a consistent fight for the immediate and historic needs of the proletariat. They are directed at clearing away bureaucratic obstacles that can interfere with winning broader layers of the proletariat to the transitional demands of the class struggle left wing.

These three themes unify the fight against the bureaucracy with the fight against the capitalists in that they simultaneously attack the program and methods of the bureaucrats and strengthen the unions as militant organisations of class struggle.

The integration of these two fights in a way that corresponds to their relative objective significance can be achieved only through the conscious intervention of the Marxist vanguard party. The role of the party is thus decisive in helping the class-struggle left wing to find the next steps forward at each stage of the struggle. The party likewise provides a nucleus of cadres and the indispensable programmatic basis on which the class-struggle left wing can begin to develop.

While the present small size of the vanguard party in Australia limits the number of workers who can be directly exposed to the revolutionary perspective for the unions, this is no reason for pessimism and no justification for delaying the process of beginning to unite whatever class-struggle tendencies are available. As Trotsky wrote:

It is precisely in the present epoch, when the reformist bureaucracy of the proletariat

has transformed itself into the economic police of capital, that revolutionary work in the trade unions, performed intelligently and systematically may yield decisive results in a comparatively short time.²²

9. Trade union democracy

Democracy is indispensable if the workers are to reclaim and keep their unions from the hands of the bureaucracy. But democracy is more than simply a method of ensuring a free selection of union leadership. It requires the active involvement of the entire membership in the union's activities on a daily basis and is therefore inseparable from a militant fight against the capitalists. This involvement should be encouraged by frequent policy making conferences of representatives democratically elected from the workplaces, among other measures.

The demand for trade union democracy immediately runs up against the bureaucracy, which has developed a host of anti-democratic practices to protect itself against the membership, methods ranging from infrequent and bureaucratically organised branch meetings to the arbitrary expulsion of militants and the rigging of branch elections. Even when the ranks have not yet broken with the bureaucracy on the level of policy, the latter seeks to maintain its arsenal of anti-democratic practices for the day when it will be needed. It therefore opposes any attempt to open up the unions to genuine rank-and-file control.

The maximum of union democracy provides the best environment for the growth of a class-struggle left wing, because the free clash of ideas is the best basis for a widespread understanding of the principles of class-struggle unionism. Union democracy includes the right of tendency — that is, the right to hold and put forward the views of a particular organisation or current within the workers' movement.

Trade union democracy is not a timeless abstraction; it cannot be separated from questions of program: of whose interests democracy is to serve. In "Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay", Trotsky explained:

Democratic unions in the old sense of the term — bodies where, in the framework of one and the same mass organisation, different tendencies struggle more or less freely — can no longer exist. Just as it is impossible to bring back the bourgeois-democratic state, so is it impossible to bring back the old workers' democracy. The fate of the one reflects the fate of the other. As a matter of fact, the independence of the trade unions in the class sense, in their relations to the bourgeois state, can, in the present conditions, be assured only by a completely revolutionary leadership, that is, the leadership of the Fourth International. This leadership, naturally, must and can be rational and assure the unions the maximum of democracy conceivable under the present concrete

conditions. But without the political leadership of the Fourth International the independence of the trade unions is impossible.²³

Revolutionary propaganda and agitation concerning questions of union democracy should therefore be closely linked to the fight against the class-collaborationist policies of the bureaucracy that it defends by anti-democratic methods. Socialists advocate greater democratic control by the membership as a method of strengthening struggles against the capitalists and denying the bureaucracy the opportunity to betray those struggles.

Trade union democracy necessarily includes democracy in the Labor Party, the party formed to represent the unions in the political arena. Revolutionaries argue for democratic election of delegates to ALP conferences, after full and free discussion and debate of political programs. They explain the need for ALP officials to be subject to control of the elected delegates, including through the right of recall, and especially for ALP parliamentarians to be subordinate to the party program and the democratic decisions of party bodies, in which the predominance of the unions should be assured.

10. Class independence

Trotsky wrote that trade union democracy “presupposes for its realization the complete freedom of the trade unions from the imperialist or colonial state”.²⁴

Independence of the unions from the capitalist state means ending their subordination, through the medium of the bureaucracy, to the needs of the class enemy, as Trotsky also explained:

... It is necessary to adapt ourselves to the concrete conditions existing in the trade unions of every given country in order to mobilize the masses, not only against the bourgeoisie, but also against the totalitarian regime within the trade unions themselves and against the leaders enforcing this regime. The primary slogan for this struggle is: *complete and unconditional independence of the trade unions in relation to the capitalist state*. This means a struggle to turn the trade unions into the organs of the broad exploited masses and not the organs of the labour aristocracy.²⁵

The Australian trade unions have long been subordinated to the capitalist state through the arbitration system. This subordination is reinforced by the reformist ideology of the Labor Party, which projects a strategy of using the bourgeois state to guarantee the fights and living standards of the working class. The class-struggle left wing will have to inscribe on its banner: *For full independence from the arbitration system! For free collective bargaining as the basis for defending wages and conditions!*

As the economic crisis deepens, the capitalist state — whether under a Liberal or Labor government — will seek still further control over all the activities of the unions

through anti-union laws and through class-collaborationist means (social contracts, arbitration). Revolutionaries in the unions must take the lead in explaining the importance of independence from the capitalist state and fighting against state interference with the democratic right of the membership to control union affairs.

The concept of class independence must not be confused with syndicalist illusions about the possibility of simply ignoring the state and its activities. The proletariat can not afford to leave questions of politics and the role of the state in the sole hands of the bourgeoisie.

Marxists advocate that the unions carry their struggles against the capitalists into the political arena as well, fighting for full recognition of union rights and for legislation on wages, hours, working conditions, etc. that benefits workers. But as Lenin pointed out in *What Is To Be Done?* such measures remain within the framework of capitalist economy and of trade union consciousness. Revolutionaries therefore treat such measures not as ends in themselves but as the beginning of a series of transitional demands — sliding scale of wages and hours, workers' control of industry, nationalisations, against war spending, etc. — that lead the proletariat and its allies towards the creation of a workers' and farmers' government.

Legislative recognition of victories won in the struggle for immediate or transitional demands can be a step forward for the proletariat, however, only when they are not achieved at the price of concessions or trade-offs that bind the unions closer to the capitalist state and limit their freedom to struggle. Clarity on this question is indispensable for development of the class-struggle left wing.

11. Working-class unity

The need for working-class unity against the capitalists is the reason for the existence of unions. Strengthening this unity is a prime task of the class-struggle left wing.

Structural changes such as amalgamations can be one factor in strengthening unity. A limitation of Australian unionism has been its overwhelmingly craft character — there are now about 300 separate unions representing large and small sections of the workforce. The disadvantages of this fragmentation are acknowledged even by sections of the bureaucracy. In general, industrial unionism represents a higher degree of working-class unity and greater strength in struggles with the capitalists or their state. But it is important that amalgamations of existing unions be carried out democratically, with full participation and control by the rank and file; otherwise, the new unions may be merely a means of enhancing the power of the bureaucrats over the membership.

The trade unions can not be said to really unite the working class while nearly 50%

of the workforce remains outside the unions. The non-unionised are in large part the most exploited layers of the proletariat, and their extra exploitation acts to drag down the living standards of the entire working class. The organising of the unorganised, a task ignored by the bureaucracy, falls to the leadership of the class-struggle left wing. This will require a struggle against chauvinism and racism and against sexist practices that exclude women from particular job categories.

Within the unions, greater unity requires conscious and consistent effort to involve specially oppressed or exploited groups, such as women, migrants, and apprentices, in union affairs. The unions have to become the consistent defenders of the interests of such groups, fighting for measures like affirmative action, English-language training on the employers' time, full wages and union rights for apprentices, etc.

Proletarian unity also means solidarity with other workers in their struggles, regardless of organisational or other divisions. A class-struggle left wing will seek to make such solidarity an automatic reflex on the part of the entire working class, against the efforts of the capitalists and bureaucrats to create artificial divisions and to isolate struggles.

Solidarity must be extended internationally as well as within the Australian trade union movement. Particularly in an imperialist country, a failure to extend solidarity to workers in other countries undermines working-class unity and class independence on the national level. It undercuts the fight against imperialist war and leaves the proletariat susceptible to the bureaucrats' class-collaborationist projects for defending "national" industry. To defend both its immediate and its historic interests, the Australian labour movement must learn to regard as its own the victories and defeats of workers everywhere.

12. Conditions for transforming the unions

The transformation of the unions into revolutionary instruments is primarily a matter of developing the proletariat's consciousness and combativity, although gains in this process can and must be consolidated in organisational forms.

The period in which we live is one whose objective features impel the proletariat of the imperialist countries along the path of greater class consciousness. Since the long post-World War II boom ended in the 1974-75 international recession, the economic contradictions inherent in capitalism have reasserted themselves with a vengeance. Since that time, an increase of militancy and struggle has been a precondition for the working class merely defending its living standards at the existing level.

The setbacks suffered by the Australian labour movement in this period were the result of the inevitable lag between changed objective circumstances and working class

consciousness, a lag extended by the role of the bureaucracy. But these setbacks have also begun the process of changing that consciousness, as workers have seen their living standards eroded and unable to be defended by the old methods.

The proletariat's experiences in the present deep recession, and in those to come, can provide the impetus for a further undermining of all old-established ideas and values. This does not at all mean that defeats are a necessary part of raising working-class consciousness, but that the growing instability of capitalism increasingly poses for workers the need for social change. Trotsky wrote on this question:

The question, which is raised by many comrades abstractly, of just what will lead to revolution: impoverishment or prosperity, is completely false when so formulated ... Neither impoverishment nor prosperity as such can lead to revolution. But the alternation of prosperity and impoverishment, the crises, the uncertainty, the absence of stability — these are the motor factors of revolution.

... [The] tranquil mode of existence [of the labour bureaucracy] has also exerted its influence upon the psychology of a broad layer of workers who are better off. But today this blessed state, this stability of living conditions, has receded into the past; in place of artificial prosperity has come impoverishment. Prices are steeply rising, wages keep changing in or out of consonance with currency fluctuations. Currency leaps, prices leap, wages leap and then come the ups and downs of feverish fictitious conjunctures and of profound crises. This lack of stability, the uncertainty of what tomorrow will bring in the personal life of every worker, is the most revolutionary factor of the epoch in which we live ...

This absence of stability drives the most imperturbable worker out of equilibrium.

It is a revolutionary motor power.²⁶

A period of economic crisis is also a period of sharp political shocks that undermine the authority of bourgeois institutions and methods of rule. It is symptomatic of the present period that it opened with the bourgeois campaign to destroy the federal Labor government and the constitutional coup of November 1975.²⁷ This was only the first of many blows that will be dealt to parliamentarist illusions as the major class forces and intermediate layers seek more direct means to protect themselves from the economic crisis.

The proletariat's experiences of this economic and political instability can lead to sudden upsurges of struggles in particular industries or on a broader basis, as in the Queensland general strike.²⁸

It is in such struggles against the capitalists or their state that the ranks of the unions will most quickly come to understand the need for class-struggle unionism and that the most consistent class-struggle militants will most quickly win authority as

leaders. The beginning of this process is the beginning of the formation of the class-struggle left wing.

As a class, the proletariat learns through experience. But an indispensable part of this experience, if the class is to learn all it needs to know, is its close contact with the revolutionary party. Only a revolutionary party, uniting the most class-conscious members of the proletariat, can generalise the lessons of struggles and show the way forward at each stage. The party's propaganda and agitation, its cadres propagating socialist ideas on the job and setting an example as the best class-struggle unionists, are as indispensable to the transformation of the unions as are the unions' struggles against the capitalists.

Thus the growth of the party and the spreading of its influence to broader layers are inseparable from the development of a class-struggle left wing and the fight to transform the unions. The modest success already experienced in winning new members to the party and increasing the party's authority with layers of the industrial working class is itself evidence of the ripening of conditions for the growth of a class-struggle left wing.

Whatever the conjunctural shifts, the objective trend of events is towards a further ripening of these conditions. Now is the time for the party to step up its efforts at linking up with and bringing together the initial nuclei of the class-struggle left wing, those militant sections of the working class that are looking for solutions to the present crisis on the basis of class-struggle unionism and a fight against the bureaucracy of both the "left" and right varieties.

13. Flexible tactics against the bureaucracy

While it is indisputable that only a transformation of the unions based on the increased consciousness and activity of the ranks can cleanse the unions of bureaucracy, it would be a schematic error to deduce from this a particular order of events which the class struggle left wing must pass through in its development.

For instance, it would be mistaken for a revolutionary party to focus its own attention and that of the workers it influences on the election of union officials in a way that detracts from building the class-consciousness and militancy of the membership in the central struggle against the capitalists. But it would also be a mistake to ignore the interaction between official leaders and elections on the one hand and the promoting or retarding of class consciousness and militancy on the other. Elections of union officials are primarily a reflection — more or less distorted according to the degree of bureaucratic rigging — of the relationship of forces between the bureaucracy and the sections of the ranks who desire a change, and, at one further remove, of the relationship

of fates between bourgeoisie and proletariat. But they can also serve to consolidate gains that have been made in the fight against the bureaucracy and to provide new openings for struggle by the ranks. Just as the revolutionary party cannot ignore the immediate needs of the proletariat but must seek ways to link them with the class's historic interests, so class-struggle fighters cannot ignore the question of the official leadership in the fight for immediate demands but must make the leadership question an element of the larger struggle to transform the unions into effective weapons against the main enemy, the capitalist class.

During the debate on the trade union theses at the Second Congress of the Communist International, a German delegate, Jakob Walcher, pointed out that there were two different errors that could be made on the leadership question. One was to make the question all-important, in the manner of the centrist Independent Social Democratic Party,²⁹ the other was to try to evade the question, as the ultralefts hoped to do through establishing separate revolutionary unions:

It will be said: "Yes, the masses are ready, but the leaders are to blame." This notion leads to the assumption that it is enough to eliminate the leaders, and then everything will be fine. The German Independents' entire trade union policy is oriented to filling individual leadership posts with their followers. They neglect revolutionary activity among the masses themselves. The Wolffheims and Rühles,³⁰ on the other hand, say that even if the bureaucracy is eliminated, that will not change the essence of the matter. The British comrades reason the same way in their theses. This is a strange contradiction. On the one hand it is the leaders' fault; on the other, it does not matter whether there are leaders or not. In Germany the Wolffheims and Rühles put this to the test. It is our duty to issue a strong warning against following their example.³¹

The *Transitional Program* also points to the replacement of the existing bureaucratic leaderships by "new militant leaders" as a necessary element in the revolutionary strategy for transforming the unions into organs capable of fighting the capitalists:

... In periods of acute class struggle, the leading bodies of the trade unions aim to become masters of the mass movement in order to render it harmless. This is already occurring during the period of simple strikes, especially in the case of the mass sit-down strikes which shake the principle of bourgeois property. In time of war or revolution, when the bourgeoisie is plunged into exceptional difficulties, the trade union leaders usually become bourgeois ministers.

Therefore, the sections of the Fourth International should always strive not only to renew the top leadership of the trade unions, boldly and resolutely in critical moments advancing new militant leaders in place of routine functionaries and careerists, but also to create in all possible instances independent militant organisations corresponding

more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society; and if necessary, not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the trade unions. If it be criminal to turn one's back on mass organisations for the sake of fostering sectarian fictions, it is no less so to passively tolerate subordination of the revolutionary mass movement to the control of openly reactionary or disguised conservative ("progressive") bureaucratic cliques. Trade unions are not ends in themselves; they are but means along the road to proletarian revolution.³²

In appropriate circumstances, a challenge to the bureaucracy for official positions can be a vehicle for class-struggle militants to test, broaden, or consolidate the authority they have gained through day-to-day activity on the job or in the union's struggle. It can be a way of mobilising in support of class-struggle policies sections of the membership whose justified cynicism about the bureaucratic officials makes them reluctant to take up a struggle against the capitalists.

There is no revolutionary *strategy* of transforming the unions through contesting elections to official posts. A union election campaign is a tactic, suitable or unsuitable in different circumstances, that must be subordinated to the strategy of developing the class-struggle left wing and extending its influence in the fight against the class enemy.

But there is no preordained succession of stages in this process. The sequence of events will vary at different times, in different industries, and in different unions. The growth of the influence of the class-struggle left wing — and of the revolutionary party that is central to it — will not be a linear progression, but one of ups and downs and unexpected shifts. Within this overall process, union election campaigns, like any other tactic, must be a natural outgrowth of the deepening influence of the union's class-struggle militants.

14. Winning leadership for the party

Our party's cadres in the unions have learned from experience that a record of militancy and clear class-struggle answers to the problems facing workers often results in fellow workers urging them to stand for leadership positions in the union and especially for shop steward positions. There is no a priori rule that can determine whether a party cadre should stand for election in such a case. The decision has to be based equally on a spirit of revolutionary audacity and on a sober analysis of the possible gains and pitfalls, within the context of our strategy for transforming the unions.

Our aim is to become the real leaders of our class, and there are clearly situations in which real leadership would not coincide with winning a union position and could even be hampered by it. Moreover, Trotsky points out that there are more important

gauges of party leadership than trade union positions:

The number of communists in leading posts of the trade unions is only one of the means of measuring the role of the party in the trade unions. The most important measurement is the percentage of rank-and-file communists in relation to the whole unionized mass. But the principal criterion is the general influence of the party on the working class, which is measured by the circulation of the communist press, the attendance at meetings of the party, the number of votes at elections and, what is especially important, the number of working men and women who respond actively to the party's appeals to struggle.³³

In deciding whether a member should stand in a union election, the party has to consider whether the position in question involves sufficient freedom of action to permit its use in advancing our goals or whether, on the contrary, the person occupying it is subject to a greater degree of bureaucratic control.

Of course, this problem is not a severe one in regard to the contesting of shop steward positions. Here our contact with the ranks and the relative lack of control by the bureaucracy often make these positions useful ones from which to pursue our class-struggle policies on the job and in the union as a whole. But an important element in assessing whether to stand for higher leadership positions is the attitude and understanding of our fellow workers: Do they see our candidacy as merely a matter of finding someone to do *for* them what the bureaucrats fail to do? Or are they trying to remove a bureaucratic obstacle and secure a position to aid them in their own struggles? Our approach should be that outlined in the trade union theses of the Second Congress of the Comintern:

The irresolution of the working class, its confusion over theory, its susceptibility to the arguments of the opportunist leaders can be overcome only in the course of a developing struggle. The broadest layers of the proletariat have to understand through their own experiences — through their own victories and defeats — that it is objectively impossible to achieve human conditions of life under the capitalist system. The advanced working-class communists have to learn not only to introduce communist ideas to workers participating in economic struggles, but to establish themselves as the most effective leaders of the economic struggle in the trade unions. This is the only way the trade unions can be rid of their opportunist leaders, the only way communists can take the lead in the trade union movement and make it an instrument in the revolutionary battle for communism. Only thus can they prevent the splintering of the trade unions, establishing industrial associations in their place. Only thus can they eliminate the bureaucracy which is cut off from the masses, replacing it with an apparatus of factory representatives and leaving only the most essential functions to the centre.³⁴

The framework of the party's attitude to winning leading posts in the unions should be that outlined by James P. Cannon — then a leader of the US Communist Party — in 1924. Speaking to a party conference of coal miners, Cannon said:

I want to pass over now to another question which will become more and more important as our strength develops in the trade unions. It has confronted us already a number of times. That is the question of comrades holding office in the unions and becoming candidates for office. This may become one of our greatest dangers, and one of the greatest sources of corruption of party members, if we do not properly estimate this question and take a resolute stand on it at the very beginning.

In the discussions which took place here today, we heard the remark made by one of the comrades that our struggle in the unions is a struggle for strategic positions. This is a one-sided view and if we allow it to stand alone, we will fall into a serious error. We must adopt the point of view that our struggle is a struggle to develop the class consciousness of the rank and file workers and to win them over to the principle of the revolutionary struggle against capitalism under the leadership of our party.

If we will connect the fight for strategic positions with this broad political aim and subordinate it to this aim, we will be on safe ground. Otherwise, we will be confronted with the spectacle of party members regarding the fight for office as an end in itself, of evading or putting aside questions of principle with which the masses are not familiar; of scheming and calculating too closely in order to get into office. Of course the comrades will justify all this on the ground that once they get into office they will be able to do big things for the party. But quite often we will be apt to find the very comrades who adopt this method of getting into office falling into the habit of continuing it in order to hold the office. They will thereby degenerate into mere office-holders and office hunters. They will lose the confidence and respect of the militant rank and file workers, and our party, which stands responsible for them, will have its prestige greatly injured.

Strategic positions, however, are very important and we must not take a doctrinaire view in regard to them. The opinion expressed here by one comrade that men become petty bourgeois in their interests and outlook as soon as they are elected to office and that, therefore, we should have nothing to do with office, is not correct. It is true that official position, especially in the American trade union movement, has led many men in the past to corruption and betrayal of the workers, but that does not say the communists must be corrupted. We have to hold the conception that a true communist can go anywhere the party sends him and do anything, and still remain a communist — still remain true to the working class. Comrade Lenin was an official. He had more power than Frank Farrington, but he did not become like Frank Farrington.³⁵ The

guarantee against corruption of party members who become officials is that they remain close to the party and that they base their fight for office on the support of the rank and file for the policy of the class struggle, and do not become too expedient and too “clever” — do not try to “sneak” into office by soft-peddling and pussyfooting on questions of principle which may be unpopular, but which communists, nevertheless, are duty-bound to stand for ...

We can sum up the whole question in a few words. We are not progressives, but revolutionists. Our role in the union movement is to organise the masses for the proletarian revolution and to lead them in the struggle for it. All of our daily work must be related to this, and subordinated to it. The test of our work can never be made by formal victories on paper, but by the development of class consciousness in the ranks of the workers, the degree of their organisation on that basis and the increasing influence and leadership of our party. Strategic positions in the labour movement are of importance chiefly from the standpoint of enabling the party to advance and develop its work of revolutionizing the masses.

Let us be shrewd and practical by all means. Let us learn how to meet every question that arises in the union, in a realistic and businesslike manner. Let us become experts in the daily work of the unions, and in manoeuvring for strategic positions, but let us also remember always the danger of degenerating into mere professional office seekers.

Active unionists, especially those who hold office, are beset by a thousand temptations to turn aside from the road of the class struggle. Only their close union with the party will enable them to overcome these temptations. With the assistance of the party they will learn how to serve the workers in the daily struggle and to connect all their activity with the task of leading the masses toward the final revolution. They will learn how to measure their progress at every step, not by formal victories on paper, but by the development of the class consciousness of the workers and the influence of the party, by the extent to which their activity inspires the workers with that spirit of determined struggle, which is the spirit of communism.³⁶

When the party decides that a cadre should stand for a union post, the candidacy is of course on the basis of the party's decision on the demands most appropriate at that point. A party campaign in a union election must be based on a Leninist understanding of the need to go beyond union consciousness to socialist consciousness; hence it cannot be limited to slogans or pledges concerned only with immediate needs but should seek to popularise the transitional demands corresponding to the next steps forward for the union and its members.

Union elections differ from governmental elections in that they are far less

appropriate as purely propaganda vehicles for socialist ideas. In a governmental election, the party's campaigns never suggest that *election* of our candidate would solve any of the major problems confronting the voters: They are campaigns to spread socialist ideas to a wider audience, and votes are of interest only as an indirect measure of our success in this aim.

Even when the party's influence has grown to the point that our candidates for governmental offices are sometimes elected, our campaigns will remain propaganda campaigns. We take no responsibility for the functioning of the capitalist state. Party members elected to offices of the bourgeois state will be advance guards of the proletariat operating on the terrain of the class enemy. Their task will be to use the forum provided by the bourgeois state to agitate against the bourgeoisie. The replacement of the existing officials of the bourgeois state by socialists is not an element of our strategy for the revolutionary transformation of society.

The opposite is the case in union elections. The unions are not organs of the class enemy, but of the proletariat, although this character is distorted by the class-collaborationist bureaucracy. Replacement of the existing officials is an element of the revolutionary strategy for transforming the unions. Thus when the party supports or stands a candidate for a union leadership position, it says not only that the candidate's platform is superior to the other alternatives. It says as well that election of the candidate would, at least in some degree, aid the ranks in making the union a more effective instrument of struggle.

Of course, a party campaign in a union election is also a propaganda campaign in the sense that *one* of its aims is to gain a wider hearing for revolutionary ideas. But if an election campaign is to be part of our union strategy, if it is to be a natural step in the party's winning of influence in the unions, then it will also be aimed at winning, even when the likelihood is small. The standing of candidates is a declaration of war on the bureaucracy, delivered openly before the entire membership. It announces that the party is serious about becoming the official leadership as its transitional policies win support. Hence to run a campaign that was only propagandistic would in effect be to make light of the problems confronting the membership. It would trivialise the burning question of proletarian leadership.

Because the party is serious about becoming both the *de facto* and official leadership of the unions, the growth of party influence will eventually mean that standing in union elections is the norm rather than the exception. This will be a necessary part of bringing the unions under the leadership of the party, as Lenin advocated:

... the party must exert every effort to educate the workers who belong to trade unions in the spirit of a broad understanding of the class struggle and the socialist aims of the

proletariat; by its activities to win a virtually leading position in these unions; and lastly to ensure that these unions, under certain conditions, come into direct association with the party — however, without at all expelling non-party members from their ranks.³⁷

At present, however, the number of our cadres and our influence in the unions of the industrial working class are small. Skilful use of the united-front tactic, which must be part of the arsenal of even a mass revolutionary party, is indispensable to beginning the twin tasks of transforming the unions and increasing the party's influence.

15. The united front

The proletarian forces that transform the unions into revolutionary instruments will come from quite diverse backgrounds and experiences. There will be currents that set out on the correct road only to transform themselves into obstacles part way to the goal. There will be others who arrive at the goal only after false starts and numerous detours.

The revolutionary party requires a clear and principled understanding of the united-front tactic if it is to make the most of what varied currents can contribute to transforming the unions. The two inseparable principles of this tactic are united action for any genuine step forward and the political and organisational independence of the revolutionary party.

Lacking such an understanding, a small party can easily be tempted into renouncing its political independence, its program, for the sake of an illusory influence in a broader milieu. This was the experience of the British Communist Party in the Minority Movement³⁸ in the 1920s:

Stalin, Bukharin, Zinoviev — in this question they were all in solidarity, at least initially — sought to replace the weak British Communist Party by a “broader current”, which had at its head, to be sure, not members of the party, but “friends”, almost-Communists, at any rate fine fellows and good acquaintances. The fine fellows, the “solid leaders”, did not, of course, want to submit themselves to the leadership of a small, weak Communist Party. That was their full right; the party cannot force anybody to submit himself to it. The agreements between the Communists and the “lefts” (Purcell, Hicks, Cook)³⁹ on the basis of the partial tasks of the trade union movement were, of course, quite possible and in certain cases essential. But on one condition: the Communist Party had to preserve its complete independence, even within the trade unions, act in its own name in all the questions of principle, criticise its “left” allies whenever necessary, and in this way win the confidence of the masses step by step.

This only possible road, however, appeared too long and uncertain to the bureaucrats

of the CI. They considered that by means of personal influence upon Purcell, Hicks, Cook and the others ... they would gradually and imperceptibly draw the leftist opposition (“the broad current”) into the bed of the Communist International. To guarantee such a success with greater security, the dear friends (Purcell, Hicks and Cook) were not to be vexed or exasperated or displeased by petty chicanery, by inopportune criticism, by sectarian intransigence, and so forth. But since one of the tasks of the Communist Party consists precisely of upsetting the peace of and alarming all centrists and semicentrists, a radical measure had to be resorted to by actually subordinating the CP to the Minority Movement. On the trade union field appeared only the leaders of this movement. The British Communist Party had practically ceased to exist for the masses.⁴⁰

On the other hand, a lack of confidence in the party’s ability to maintain its political independence could lead to a sectarian abstentionism that refused to seek out the temporary blocs required by the course of the class struggle.

In the article just quoted, Trotsky went on to outline the need for an active united front policy in the unions in order to win leadership on a class-struggle program:

Certain comrades insist above all that the communists must fight for their influence on the trade unions by means of ideas and not by mechanical means. This thought, which may seem incontestable, is frequently converted into an empty commonplace. The centrist bureaucracy⁴¹ also declares quite frequently, and quite sincerely, that its task is to influence by ideas and not to exercise a mechanical pressure.

The whole question, in the last analysis, is reduced to the political and economic orientation, to the slogans and the program of action. If the orientation is right, if the slogans correspond to the needs of the moment, then the masses in the trade unions experience no “constraint”. On the contrary, if the orientation is wrong, if the policy of revolutionary ascent is proclaimed at the moment of political ebb, and conversely, then the mass inevitably takes this as a mechanical pressure upon it. The question consequently is reduced to whether the theoretical premises of the Left Opposition are sufficiently serious and profound, if its cadres are sufficiently educated to evaluate the situation correctly and to advance the corresponding slogans. All this must be tested in practice. It is therefore all the more impermissible for us to pass over in silence or to underestimate the sins and the mistakes of our temporary allies as well as of ourselves.⁴²

It is also important to bear in mind that the united-front tactic is only a tactic, not a panacea. Particularly when we are confronting conscious reformists, there will be many cases where it proves impossible to establish a united front on a principled basis. Trotsky explained this in another article written at about the same time:

It is self-understood that we in no case put agreement with the reformists, whether

locally or centrally, as the indispensable and preliminary condition for the struggle in each specific case. We do not orient ourselves according to the reformists but according to the objective circumstances and state of mind of the masses. The same applies to the character of demands put forward. It would be fatal for us to engage ourselves in advance to accept the united front according to the conditions of the reformists, that is, upon the basis of minimal demands. The working masses will not rise for the struggle in the name of demands that seem fantastic to them. But on the other hand, should the demands be too limited in advance, then the workers may say to themselves: "The game is not worth the candle."

The task does not consist of each time proposing the united front formally to the reformists, but of imposing conditions upon them which correspond as best as possible to the situation. All this calls for an active and manoeuvrist strategy ...⁴³

It is also essential at all times to keep in mind the temporary character of any united front and the need to break sharply with temporary allies when their paths diverge from ours. This is especially the case with "left" bureaucrats in the unions, who are capable of adopting formally correct positions on issues that do not touch their own interests or commit them too much, in order to cover the betrayals they will commit on the issues that are central to their own bureaucratic survival.

It is also possible, however, that major struggles in which the bureaucracy is forced to participate will split the bureaucracy itself with some of the least-corrupted elements coming over permanently to the side of the workers.

There are three broad goals that should be accomplished by the use of the united-front tactic in the unions.

A correct use of the united-front tactic will help to win fellow workers to the party's perspectives for transforming the unions and to its program of transitional demands. It is thus a method of building the party in the trade unions.

A united front is also the best method of fighting the capitalists. The unions themselves are in many respects ongoing united fronts. Unity in action — whether within a single union or between two or more unions — gives the best chance of success to working-class struggles.

Finally, the united-front tactic serves as a means of exposing the unwillingness of the bureaucracy to fight for the interests of the membership. The very fact that unity behind the pressing demands of the proletariat must be forced on the bureaucracy implicitly marks it off as a distinct layer opposed to the ranks. Timely proposals for united action and the bureaucrats' response can help to deepen this understanding in the ranks of the unions.

The party's stand in union elections will most frequently involve a particular

application of the united-front tactic. The goal in union elections is the same as in any other area of the party's activity in the unions: winning adherents to the revolutionary perspective for the unions, building unity against the class enemy, and undermining the hold of the bureaucracy.

It is possible to sketch out certain broad situations in which the united-front tactic can be used in union elections to further the construction of the class-struggle left wing or to create more favourable conditions for struggle. Indicating the following broad categories does not, of course, mean that every union election will fit into one of them or provide important openings for the revolutionary party's propaganda or action.

Contests between different sections of the bureaucracy may provide opportunities if one of the contenders seeks broader support by promising more determined struggle for immediate demands, greater union democracy, etc. The party takes its stand on such contests on the basis of which ticket in office would offer the more favourable conditions for developing the ranks' ability and willingness to struggle. In general where there is a realistic prospect of the bureaucrats being held to at least some of their promises, the party gives critical support to the "left" bureaucrats against the openly right-wing bureaucrats, with the emphasis on criticism: pointing out the inadequacies of the bureaucrats' program and warning of the betrayals to come.

From time to time we also see challenges to incumbent officials from elements outside the bureaucracy. These often originate from "rank and file" groups, which may represent the dissatisfactions of ordinary members of the workers, left groups seeking a shortcut to transforming the union. While normally advancing a program of greater union democracy and more militant struggle for immediate demands, such tickets are generally hampered by an exclusively electoralist approach and consequently easily fall prey to disillusion and demoralisation as the result of either defeat or victory. Where such tickets reflect a real desire for change within the ranks, the party supports their election without supporting their illusions, explaining in a comradely fashion the limitations of their approach and the need for a class-struggle program involving broad layers of the union in action on an ongoing basis.

We can also expect to see the emergence of tickets composed of class-struggle militants, whose perspective goes beyond merely replacing the bureaucrats to include at least some of the necessary advances on the road to transforming the unions. Such groupings will normally be formed as a result of their experiences in important struggles and will be a potential component of the class-struggle left wing. The party seeks close collaboration with such tendencies in order to aid them and participate in their further evolution. Where our influence and authority is sufficient, the party may be instrumental in the formation of such groupings.

16. Against organisational fetishism

An active and manoeuvrist strategy precludes any fetishism regarding organisational forms. This includes even the question of formal trade union unity, as was pointed out in the trade union theses of the Second Congress of the Comintern:

The communists consider the goal and life of the union organisations to be more important than the external form they assume, and therefore should not shrink from splitting the union organisations if a refusal to do so would signify a refusal to engage in revolutionary activity in the unions, attempting to transform them into a weapon of revolutionary struggle, and a refusal to organise the more exploited sections of the proletariat. But even if a split proves necessary it must be carried into effect only when the communists have succeeded — through consistent struggle against the opportunist leaders and their tactics and by active participation in the economic struggle — in convincing the broad masses of workers that the split is being undertaken not for the sake of some distant revolutionary aims which they do not yet understand, but for the sake of the most immediate and concrete interests of the working class and the development of its economic struggle. Should a split be necessary, communist tactics must be constantly and carefully analysed to ensure that the split does not lead to the isolation of the communists from the working masses.⁴⁴

Splits of this sort will become possible and even probable at a more developed stage of the struggle, when the class-struggle left wing is winning or has won the allegiance of the ranks, and the bureaucracy seeks to retain its position through openly trampling on the democratic rights of the membership. Such a situation implies a period of intensified economic and political crisis, in which there is a powerful tendency to establish additional bodies such as factory committees alongside the unions, as the embryo of the proletariat's solution to the crisis. The Comintern theses explained:

Agitation for factory committees must be conducted in such a way that the broadest layers of the popular masses, including those that are not directly a part of the industrial proletariat, become convinced that the bourgeoisie is to blame for the crisis, and that the proletariat, in advancing its slogan of workers' control of industry, is fighting for the organisation of production and for the abolition of speculation, industrial chaos, and inflation. The tasks of the communist parties are: to struggle for control over production, organising around the most immediate issues such as the fuel shortage and the transport crisis, to link isolated sections of the proletariat and to win over the large groups of the petty bourgeoisie which are suffering in an unprecedented fashion from the economic crisis, and are rapidly being proletarianised.

Factory committees cannot replace the trade unions. Only in the course of the struggle can they extend beyond the individual factory and workshop to unite workers

on an industry-wide basis, creating an apparatus which can provide leadership for the whole struggle. Trade unions are already centralized and militant bodies; they do not, however, involve such wide masses of workers as the factory committees, which are broad organisations accessible to the entire workforce of an enterprise. These different functions of the factory committees and the trade unions reflect the historical development of the social revolution. The trade unions organise the working masses on a national scale for the struggle around demands for wage increases and shorter hours. The factory committees organise the fight to overcome the economic crisis and establish workers' control over production; all the workers in an enterprise participate, but their struggle only gradually assumes a national character. Communists should support the move to transform factory committees into trade union factory cells only as the trade unions overcome the counterrevolutionary tendencies of their bureaucracy and become conscious revolutionary bodies.⁴⁵

One of the tasks of the revolutionary party is to prepare the way for such bodies by propagandising in advance on the need for workers' councils and factory committees. Naturally such propaganda has to be a part of, not a substitute for, revolutionary work in the unions, as Trotsky explained in a 1933 article:

It is absolutely necessary right now to prepare the minds of the advanced workers for the idea of creating shop committees and workers' councils at the moment of a sharp change. But it would be a greatest mistake to "play around" in practice with the slogan of shop councils, consoling oneself with this "idea" for the lack of real work and real influence in the trade unions. To counterpose to the existing trade unions the abstract idea of workers councils would mean setting against oneself not only the bureaucracy but also the masses, thus depriving oneself of the possibility of preparing the ground for the creation of workers' councils.⁴⁶

In Australian conditions, the large number of separate craft unions gives the idea of cross-union bodies an immediate relevance. In some factories and branches of industry the bureaucrats have already been forced to acquiesce in the creation of combined union committees in various forms.

Where such cross-union bodies exist essentially as coordinating committees of the bureaucrats themselves, as is the case with the trades and labour councils, the party should concentrate on making them more responsive to the ranks through measures such as democratic elections. Where these bodies already have a form not far removed from the ranks, as with some cross-union shop stewards committees, the aim should be to strengthen their real and formal authority against that of the bureaucracies of the various unions. In periods of upsurge of struggles, strike committees or other cross-union bodies may expand into factory committees or

workers' councils.

17. Workers' control of industry

The revolutionary significance of factory committees is explained in the *Transitional Program*:

From the moment that the committee makes its appearance, a de facto dual power is established in the factory. By its very essence it represents the transitional state, because it includes in itself two irreconcilable regimes: the capitalist and the proletarian. The fundamental significance of factory committees is precisely contained in the fact that they open the doors if not to direct revolutionary, then to a prerevolutionary period between the bourgeois and the proletarian regimes ...⁴⁷

The link between the organisational form of factory committees and the class-struggle program is the demand for workers' control of industry, which occupies a central place in the *Transitional Program*. This demand arises naturally as a result of the anarchy of capitalist production:

Liberal capitalism, based upon competition and free trade, has completely receded into the past. Its successor, monopolistic capitalism, not only does not mitigate the anarchy of the market but on the contrary imparts to it a particularly convulsive character. The necessity of "controlling" economy, of placing state "guidance" over industry and of "planning" is today recognised — at least in words — by almost all currents of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois tendencies, from fascist to social-democratic ...

But the program points out that no rational control is possible without violation of the "rights" of capitalist private property. These inroads begin with the struggle to *open the books* — that is, to ensure that the workers have full access to all information about the economy.

The actual relationship existing between the exploiters and the democratic "controllers" is best characterized by the fact that the gentlemen "reformers" stop short in pious trepidation before the threshold of the trusts and their business "secrets". Here the principle of "non-interference" with business dominates. The accounts kept between the individual capitalist and society remain the secret of the capitalist: they are not the concern of society. The motivation offered for the principle of business "secrets" is ostensibly, as in the epoch of liberal capitalism, that of free "competition". In reality, the trusts keep no secrets from one another. The business secrets of the present epoch are part of a persistent plot of monopoly capitalism against the interests of society. Projects for limiting the autocracy of "economic royalists" will continue to be pathetic farces as long as private owners of the social means of production can hide from producers and consumers the machinations of exploitation, robbery, and fraud. The

abolition of “business secrets” is the first step toward actual control of industry.

Workers no less than capitalists have the right to know the “secrets” of the factory, of the trust, of the whole branch of industry, of the national economy as a whole. First and foremost, banks, heavy industry, and centralised transport should be placed under an observation glass ...

No office-holder of the bourgeois state is in a position to carry out this work, no matter with how great authority one would wish to endow him ... To break the resistance of the exploiters, the mass pressure of the proletariat is necessary. Only factory committees can bring about real control of production, calling in — as consultants but not as technocrats — specialists sincerely devoted to the people: accountants, statisticians, engineers, scientists, etc.⁴⁸

Workers’ control must be sharply counterposed to the projects of “workers’ participation” developed by capitalists and labour movement bureaucrats. Workers’ participation is in fact intended to deflect demands for workers’ control into harmless channels of class collaboration. It aims to make the proletariat take responsibility for the profitable operation of the enterprise. The same is true of the labour-capitalist and labour-capitalist-government councils set up to “consult” on the problems of various industries or of the economy as a whole.

Workers’ control, by contrast, is part of the struggle to defend workers’ jobs and living standards against the capitalists. It is a step on the proletariat’s path to the expropriation of the bourgeoisie:

The struggle against unemployment is not to be considered without the calling for a broad and bold organisation of *public works*. But public works can have a continuous and progressive significance for society, as for the unemployed themselves, only when they are made part of a general plan, worked out to cover a considerable number of years. Within the framework of this plan, the workers would demand resumption, as public utilities, of work in private businesses closed as a result of the crisis. Workers’ control in such cases would be replaced by direct workers’ management.

The working out of even the most elementary economic plan — from the point of view of the exploited, not the exploiters — is impossible without workers’ control, that is, without the penetration of the workers’ eye into all open and concealed springs of capitalist economy. Committees representing individual business enterprises should meet at conferences to choose corresponding committees of trusts, whole branches of industry, economic regions and finally, of national industry as a whole. Thus, workers’ control becomes a *school for planned economy*. On the basis of the experience of control, the proletariat will prepare itself for direct management of nationalised industry when the hour for the eventuality strikes.⁴⁹

Clearly, such a broad program of workers' control can be implemented only by a workers' and farmers' government. A fight for this demand confronts the proletariat with the need to seize political power in order to exercise economic power.

18. The Socialist Workers Party & the ALP

For all revolutionary work in the unions, the role of the Marxist vanguard party is essential. Only such a party can provide the necessary leadership to both the unionised and ununionised sections of the proletariat. Only the revolutionary party, basing itself on the accumulated lessons of working-class struggle, can guide the proletariat's daily struggle forward to its historic goal:

The communists fight for the attainment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class; but in the movement of the present, they also represent and take care of the future of that movement.⁵⁰

In Australia the fight to transform the unions into revolutionary instruments must be waged in the Australian Labor Party as well as in the unions themselves. In its form of organisation, the ALP is the party of the trade unions; in the content of its program and actions, it is the political expression of the union bureaucracy. The unions cannot become revolutionary instruments of the proletariat while the majority of the proletariat remains politically subordinate to the bourgeois program of the ALP.

In general, however, revolutionaries favour union affiliation to the ALP while that party continues to have the allegiance of the big majority of the working class. The spurious ideal of trade union "independence" in politics is not a break with the bourgeois program of the ALP. It is a break with what is progressive in the Labor Party: the understanding that the proletariat requires its own political party, separate from and opposed to the parties of the capitalists.

It is impossible for the unions to be independent of politics. Either they adopt proletarian politics, or they support, actively or passively, bourgeois politics. Thus the task at present is not to break the organisational links between the unions and the ALP; the task is to break the unions from their subordination to the bourgeois politics of class collaboration, whether in the form of the ALP program or the daily practice of the union bureaucracy.

Revolutionary propaganda therefore argues for union involvement in and control of the activities of the Labor Party not to reinforce the status quo but as part of a fight to end the ALP's subordination to the interests of capital, to change it from a political instrument of the union bureaucracy to a political instrument of proletarian militants.

It is only along this line of simultaneous struggle against the agents of the bourgeoisie in the unions and in the Labor Party that the revolutionary party can increase its own

influence, correctly orient the class-struggle left wing as it arises, and win the real leadership of the organised and unorganised proletariat.

Our goal for the trade unions is to make them independent of capitalist politics, which means making them politically subordinate to the proletariat's historic task of socialist revolution. Politics — socialist politics — must infuse every struggle even for the most limited immediate demands. This is the case not only because these struggles invariably encounter the opposition of the bourgeois state; in this period of imperialist war and economic crisis, the immediate problems confronting the proletariat and its allies cannot be solved without a government based upon and responsible to the working class and small farmers. The revolutionary party's work in the unions must be based on this understanding, as outlined in the trade union theses of the Comintern's Second Congress:

In the epoch of capitalist decay the economic struggle of the proletariat is transformed much more quickly into political struggle than in the epoch of peaceful capitalist development. Any large-scale economic conflict can develop into open revolutionary struggle, directly confronting the workers with the question of revolution. Therefore, at all stages of the economic struggle, the communists have to make it clear to the workers that the struggle can only be successful if the working class defeats the capitalist class in open battle and, by establishing its dictatorship, embarks upon socialist construction. Consequently, the communists must strive to create the highest possible degree of unity between the trade unions and the communist party, subordinating the trade-unions to the party, which represents the vanguard of the workers' revolution. For this purpose the communists must set up communist fractions in every union and every factory committee, and use them to acquire theoretical and organisational leadership in the trade-union movement.⁵¹

Notes

- 1 Marx & Engels, “The Manifesto of the Communist Party”, *The Communist Manifesto and Its Relevance for Today* (Resistance Books: Chippendale, 1998), p. 53.
- 2 Trotsky, “The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International”, *The Transitional Program & the Struggle for Socialism* (Resistance Books: Chippendale, 1999), p. 28. The *Transitional Program* (official title: “The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International”) was the basic programmatic document adopted at the founding congress of the Fourth International in 1938.
- 3 Lenin, “Theses on the Fundamental Tasks of the Second Congress of the Communist International”, *Collected Works*, Vol. 31 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1966), pp. 193-194.
- 4 Lenin, “Imperialism and the Split in Socialism”, *Imperialism The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Resistance Books: Chippendale, 1999), p. 133.
- 5 Trotsky, “Discussion With a CIO Organiser”, *Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1975), p. 68.
- 6 Trotsky, “The Unions in Britain”, *Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions*, pp. 53-54.
- 7 Trotsky, “The Errors in Principle of Syndicalism”, *Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions*, p. 28.
- 8 “The Trade Union Movement, Factory Committees and the Third International”, *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International* (Ink Links: London, 1980), p. 108.
- 9 The IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) originated as a revolutionary industrial union movement in the US in 1905. Similar organisations bearing the same name were established in Australia in 1907 and in Britain in 1911. The British shop stewards’ movement originated among metalworkers in the Clyde valley strike in Scotland in 1915 and by 1917 was a country-wide organisation of shop stewards’ committees opposed to the official union leadership’s wartime no-strike policy.
- 10 The American Federation of Labor was the peak body of the US craft-based trade unions; it was formed in 1881.
- 11 Riddell ed., *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples Unite! Proceedings and Documents*

- of the Second Congress [of the Communist International], 1920, Vol. 2 (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1991), p. 596.*
- 12 Trotsky, "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International", *The Transitional Program & the Struggle for Socialism*, p. 28.
 - 13 Trotsky, "Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay", *Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions*, p. 71.
 - 14 "The Trade Union Movement, Factory Committees and the Third International", *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*, p. 110.
 - 15 Trotsky, *ibid.*, p. 71.
 - 16 Lenin, "What Is To Be Done?", *Collected Works*, Vol. 5 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1961), p. 387.
 - 17 Lenin, *ibid.*, p. 400.
 - 18 Lenin, *ibid.*, pp. 401-402.
 - 19 Lenin, *ibid.*, pp. 405-406.
 - 20 Lenin, *ibid.*, p. 423.
 - 21 Trotsky, "The Political Backwardness of the American Workers", *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (Pathfinder Press: New York, third edition, 1977), pp. 156-157.
 - 22 Trotsky, "The Unions in Britain", *Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions*, p. 55.
 - 23 Trotsky, "Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay", *Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions*, p. 75.
 - 24 Trotsky, *ibid.*, p. 70.
 - 25 Trotsky, *ibid.*, p. 70.
 - 26 Trotsky, "Summary Speech", *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol. 1 (Monad Press: New York, second edition, 1972), pp. 233-234.
 - 27 On November 11, 1975 the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, dismissed Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, despite the fact that the ALP held a majority of seats in the House of Representatives, and appointed Liberal-National Coalition leader Malcolm Fraser to head a "caretaker" government until the holding of a federal election on December 13, 1975. Kerr's action had been preceded by a campaign in the capitalist media denouncing the Whitlam government as "incompetent" and "irresponsible", and by the refusal of the Coalition majority in the Senate to pass the government's budget appropriation bills.
 - 28 On August 23, 1982, mass meetings of unions throughout Queensland voted for an immediate 48-hour general strike in protest against Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen's attempt to use its anti-strike Essential Services Act against striking rail workers. The general strike forced the government to withdraw its suspension notices against the strikers.
 - 29 The Independent Social-Democratic Party of Germany (USPD) was formed in April 1917 under the leadership of Karl Kautsky as a left-wing breakaway from the Social-Democratic

Party (SPD). The party as a whole occupied a vacillating (“centrist”) position between the reformism of the SPD and the revolutionary Marxism of the Spartacus League led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. It participated in the bourgeois republican government headed by SPD leader Friedrich Ebert during the revolutionary crisis of November 1918-January 1919. The majority of its 900,000 members fused with the Communist Party (KPD) in December 1920; a minority retained the name until they rejoined the SPD in 1922.

- 30 Fritz Wolffheim and Otto Rühle were leaders of the Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD), an ultraleft breakaway from the KPD formed in April 1920. Admitted as a sympathising organisation of the Comintern in November 1920 it declined rapidly and split in 1921 with many of its members joining the KPD.
- 31 Riddell ed., *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples Unite! Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress [of the Communist International]*, 1920, Vol. 2, pp. 614-615.
- 32 Trotsky, “The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International”, *The Transitional Program & the Struggle for Socialism*, p. 29.
- 33 Trotsky, “Communism and Syndicalism”, *Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions*, pp. 17-18.
- 34 “The Trade Union Movement, Factory Committees and the Third International”, *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*, p. 108.
- 35 Frank Farrington was the head of the United Mine Workers District 12 (Illinois) from 1914-26 and an opponent of union president John L. Lewis.
- 36 Cannon, “Our Aims and Tactics in the Trade Unions”, *Fighting for Socialism in the ‘American Century’*, (Resistance Books: Chippendale, 2000), pp. 94-97.
- 37 Lenin, “A Tactical Platform for the Unity Congress of the RSDLP”, *Collected Works*, Vol. 10 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1962), pp. 160-161.
- 38 The *Minority Movement* was a left-wing caucus within the British Trades Union Congress initiated by the Communist Party in 1924.
- 39 Albert Purcell, George Hicks and Arthur Cook were leaders of the reformist left wing of the TUC General Council who, together with the TUC right wing, sabotaged the general strike and the great miners’ strike of 1926.
- 40 Trotsky, “The Mistakes of Rightist Elements of the Communist League on the Trade Union Question”, *Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions*, pp. 35-36.
- 41 The “centrist bureaucracy” referred to here is the Stalinist leadership of the Communist International. Trotsky characterised the Stalinist bureaucracy as a “bureaucratic centrist” current in the early 1930s to underline its tendency to waver between reformist and revolutionary policies. After the Comintern’s adoption in 1935 of the Popular Front policy of seeking coalition governments between the communist parties and liberal bourgeois parties, he no longer used this term. Stalinism had now become the “crudest form of

opportunism and social patriotism”, Trotsky wrote in 1937.

42 Trotsky, *ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

43 Trotsky, “The Question of Trade Union Unity”, *Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions*, pp. 47-48.

44 “The Trade Union Movement, Factory Committees and the Third International”, *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*, pp. 108-109.

45 *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

46 Trotsky, “The Unions in Britain”, *Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions*, p. 56.

47 Trotsky, “The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International”, *The Transitional Program & the Struggle for Socialism*, p. 30.

48 *Ibid.*, pp. 30-32.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

50 Marx & Engels, “The Manifesto of the Communist Party”, *The Communist Manifesto and Its Relevance for Today*, p. 72.

51 “The Trade Union Movement, Factory Committees and the Third International”, *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*, pp. 109-110.

This 1983 resolution of the Democratic Socialist Party addresses the question of how socialists work in the trade unions, the basic defensive organisations of the working class in its struggle with capital.

As working people face the ruthless austerity drive of the employers and their Liberal and Labor governments, new opportunities are opening up for revolutionary work in the unions, making the republishing of this document especially timely.

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