

The Question of Trade Union Unity

By LEON TROTSKY

The question of the unity of the workers' organizations is not subject to a single solution suitable for all forms of organization and for all conditions.

The question resolves itself most categorically for the party. Its complete independence is the elementary condition of revolutionary action. But even this principle does not give in advance a ready-made reply to the questions: when and under what conditions must the split, or, on the contrary, the unity be made with a debilitating political current? Such questions are settled each time on the basis of a concrete analysis of the tendencies and the political conditions. The necessity for the vanguard of the organized proletariat, in any case, remains the highest criterion, the vanguard of its complete independence and its autonomy on the basis of a distinct program of action.

But precisely such a solution of the question with regard to the party not only admits, but as a general rule, renders indispensable a quite different attitude with regard to the question of the unity of other mass organizations of the working class: trade unions, cooperatives, Soviets.

Each one of these organizations has its own tasks and methods of work, and within certain limits, independent ones. For the Communist party, all these organizations are first of all the arena of the revolutionary education of broad workers' sections and of the recruitment of the advanced and workers. The larger the mass in the given organization the greater are the possibilities it offers the revolutionary vanguard. That is why, as a rule, it is not the Communist wing but the reformist wing which takes the initiative to split the mass organizations.

THE BOLSHEVIKS AND THE TRADE UNIONS

It is enough to contrast the conduct of the Bolsheviks in 1917 to that of the British trade unions in recent years. The Bolsheviks not only remained in the same trade unions with the Mensheviks, but in certain trade unions they tolerated a Menshevik leadership, even after the October revolution, although the Bolsheviks had the overwhelming majority in the Soviets. The British trade unions, on the contrary, upon the initiative of the Laborites, not only drive the Communists out of the Labor party but, so far as it is possible, out of the trade unions as well.

In France, the split in the trade unions was also the consequence of the initiative of the reformists, and it is no accident that the revolutionary trade union organization, compelled to lead an independent existence, adopted the name of unitary (the name of the Left wing trade union center in France is "Unitary General Confederation of Labor"). Ed.]

Do we demand today that the Communists quit the ranks of the General Confederation of Labor (the Right wing trade union center)? Not at all. On the contrary: the revolutionary wing within the Confederation of Joubaux must be strengthened. But by that alone we show that the splitting of the trade union organization is in no case a question of principle for us. All these ultra-Leftist objections in principle that may be formulated against trade union unity apply first of all to the participation of Communists in the G. C. of L. Yet every revolutionist who has not lost touch with reality must recognize that the creation of Communist fractions in the reformist trade unions is an extremely important task. One of the tasks of these fractions must be the defense of the U. G. C. of L. before the members of the reformist trade unions. This cannot be accomplished except by showing that the Communists do not want the splitting of the trade unions but, on the contrary, that they are ready at any moment to re-establish trade union unity.

If one admits for an instant that the splitting of the trade unions is imposed by the duty of the Communists to oppose a revolutionary policy to that of the reformists, then one cannot limit himself to France alone: One must demand that the Communists, regardless of the relationship of forces, break with the reformist trade unions and also constitute their own trade unions in Germany, in England, in the United States, etc. In certain countries, the Communist parties have actually taken this road. In specific cases, the reformists really leave no other way out. In other cases, the Communists commit an obvious mistake by falling into the provocations of the reformists. But up to now, the Communists have never and nowhere motivated the splitting of the trade unions by the inadmissibility in principle of working with the reformists in the organizations of the proletariat masses.

Without stopping to deal with the co-operative organizations, the experiences with which will add nothing essential to what has been said above, we will take as an example the Soviets. This organization arises in one of the most revolutionary periods, when all problems are put with the keenness of a blade. Can one, however, imagine even for a moment the creation of Communist Soviets as a counterpoise to social democratic Soviets? This would mean to kill the very idea of the Soviets. At the beginning of 1917, the Bolsheviks remained within the Soviets as an insignificant minority. For months—and in a period when months counted for years, if not for decades—they tolerated a conditional majority in the Soviets, even though they already represented an overwhelming majority in the factory committees. Finally, even after the conquest of power, the Bolsheviks tolerated the Mensheviks within the Soviets while these latter represented a certain part of the working class. It was only when the Mensheviks had completely compromised and isolated themselves, by being transformed into a clique, that the Soviets threw them out of their midst.

In Spain, where in the near future the slogan of Soviets could already be put practically on the order of the day, the very creation of Soviets (juntas), provided there is an energetic and bold initiative of the Communists, is not to be conceived of otherwise than by way of a technical organizational agreement with the trade unions and the socialists on the method and the intervals of the election of workers' deputies. To advance, under these conditions, the idea of the inadmissibility of work with the reformists in the mass organizations would be one of the most disastrous forms of sectarianism.

REFORMISM AND THE WORKING CLASS

How then is such an attitude on our part towards the proletarian organizations led by the reformists to be reconciled with our evaluation of reformism as the Left wing of the imperialist bourgeoisie. This contradiction is not a formal but a dialectical one, that is to say, one that flows from the very course of the class struggle. A considerable part of the working class (its majority in a number of countries) rejects our evaluation of reformism; in other countries, it has not as yet even approached this question. The whole problem consists precisely of leading these masses to revolutionary conclusions on the basis of our common experiences with them. We say to the non-Communist and to the anti-Communist workers: "Today you still believe in the reformists leaders whom we consider to be traitors. We cannot and we do not wish to impose our point of view upon you by force. We want to convince you. Let us then endeavor to fight together and to examine the methods and the results of these fights." This means: full freedom of groupings within the united trade unions where trade union discipline exists for all.

No other principled position can be proposed.

The Executive Committee of the Ligue (Left Opposition in France) is at present correctly giving first place to the question of the united front. This is the only way that one can prevent the reformists, and above all their Left wing agents, the Monattists, from opposing to the practical tasks of the class struggle the formal slogan of unity. Vassart*, as a counter-balance to the sterile official line, has put forward the idea of the united front with the local trade union organizations. This way of posing the question is right in the sense that during local strikes it is primarily a question of working with local trade unions and specific federations. It is equally true that the lower links of the reformist apparatus are more sensitive to the pressure of the workers. But it would be wrong to make any kind of principle difference between agreements with the local opportunists and those with their chiefs. Everything depends upon the conditions of the moment, upon the strength of the pressure of the masses, and upon the character

* One of the Communist party leaders in the red trade unions who, after having been one of the most prominent banner-bearers of the "third period" policy of the Comintern and the French party, has fallen out over questions of policy with the party leadership. His course is sometimes referred to by the official party leaders, in their polemics against him, as "semi-Trotskyist". Ed.

actor of the tasks which rest on the order of the day.

It is self-understood that we in no case put the agreement with the reformists, whether locally or centrally, as the indispensable and preliminary condition for the struggle in each specific case. We do not orientate ourselves according to the reformists but according to the objective circumstances and the state of mind of the masses. The same applies to the character of the 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 would seem fantastic to them. But on the other hand, should the demands be too restricted 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 demands an active and maneuverist strategy. In any case, it is incontestable that it is particularly and only in this way that the U. G. C. of L. can moderate, up to a certain point, the consequences of the division of the masses into the trade union organizations, that it can throw the responsibility for the split upon those on whom it really belongs, and put forward its own positions of struggle.

The singularity of the situation in France presents the fact that two trade union organizations have been existing there separately for many years. In the face of the ebbs of the movement in recent years, people have accustomed themselves to the split, very often it has simply been forgotten. However, one could foresee that the revival in the ranks of the working class would inevitably revive the slogan of the unity of the trade union organizations. If one takes into account that more than nine-tenths of the French proletariat is outside of the trade unions, it becomes clear that with this revival being accentuated, the pressure of the unorganized will increase. The slogan of unity is nothing but one of the first consequences of this pressure. With a correct policy, this pressure should be favorable to the Communist party and the U. G. C. of L.

If, for the next period, an active policy of the united front is the principal method of the trade union strategy of the French Communists, it would nevertheless be a thorough mistake to oppose the policy of the united front to that of the unity of the trade union organizations.

THE PROBLEM OF THE UNITED FRONT

It is entirely incontestable that the unity of the working class can only be realized on a revolutionary basis. The policy of the united front is one of the means of liberating the workers from reformist influence and even in the last analysis, towards the genuine unity of the working class. We must constantly explain this Marxian truth to the advanced workers. But a historical perspective, even the most correct one, cannot replace the living experience of the masses. The party is the vanguard, but in its work, especially in its trade union work, it must be able to lean towards the rearward. It must, in fact, show the workers—once, twice and even ten times if necessary—that it is ready at any moment at all to help them reconstitute the unity of the trade union organizations. And in this field, we remain faithful to the essential principles of Marxian strategy: the combining of the struggle for reforms with the struggle for the revolution.

What is the attitude today of the two trade union confederations towards unity? To the broad circles of the workers, it must appear entirely identical. In truth, the administrative strata of the two organizations have declared that the unification can only be conceived of "from below" on the basis of the principles of the given organization. By covering itself with the slogan of unity from below, borrowed from the U. G. C. of L., the reformist confederation exploits the forgetfulness of the working class and the ignorance of the younger generation which knows nothing of the splitting work of Joubaux, Dumoulin and Co. At the same time, the Monattists assist Joubaux by substituting for the fighting tasks of the labor movement the single slogan of trade union unity. As honest courtiers, they direct all their efforts against the U. G. C. of L. in order to detach from it the great-

est possible number of trade unions, to group them around themselves and then to enter upon negotiations on an equal footing with the reformist confederation.

As far as I am able to judge here from the material I have, Vassart has expressed himself for the Communists themselves to put forward the slogan of a unification congress of the two trade union confederations. This proposal was categorically rejected; as for its author, he was accused of having gone over to Monatte's position. Lacking data, I am unable to express myself thoroughly on this discussion. But I consider that the French Communists have no reason to abandon the slogan of a fusion congress. On the contrary.

The Monattists say: "The first are splitters as well as the second. We alone are for unity. Workers, support us". The reformists reply: "As for us, we are for unity from below", that is, "we" will generously permit the workers to rejoin our organization. What must the revolutionary confederation say on this subject? "It is not for nothing that we call ourselves the unitary confederation. We are ready to realize the unity of the trade union organization even today. But for that the workers have no need at all of suspicious courtiers who have no trade union organization behind them and who feed upon splits like maggots on a festering wound. We propose to prepare and convene after a definite period a fusion congress on the basis of trade union democracy."

This manner of posing the question would have immediately cut the ground from under the feet of the Monattists, who are a completely sterile political grouping, but capable of bringing a great confusion into the ranks of the proletariat. But will not this liquidation of the group of courtiers cost us too dearly? It will be objected that in case the reformists should consent to a unity congress, the Communists would be in the minority there and the U. G. C. of L. would have to yield its place to the G. C. of L.

Such a consideration can only appear persuasive to a Left trade union bureaucrat who is fighting for his "independence", while losing sight of the perspectives and tasks of the movement as a whole. The unity of the two trade union organizations, even if the revolutionary wing remains in the minority for a time, would show itself in a short period of time to be favorable precisely to Communism and only to Communism. The unity of the confederations would bring in its train a great influx of new members. Thanks to this, the influence of the crisis would be reflected within the trade unions in a more profound and more decisive fashion. The Left wing would be able, within the rising new wave, to begin a decisive struggle for the conquest of the united confederation. To prefer a sure majority in a narrow and isolated trade union confederation to oppositional work in a broad and real mass organization, can be done only by sectarians or officials but not by proletarian revolutionists.

For a thinking Marxist, it is quite evident that one of the reasons which contributed to the monstrous mistakes of the leadership of the U. G. C. of L. was due to a situation where people like Monmousseau, Semard and others, without theoretical preparation or revolutionary experience immediately proclaimed themselves the "masters" of an independent organization and consequently had the possibility of experimenting with it under the orders of Losovsky, Manuilsky and Co. It is incontestable that if the reformists had not at one time arrived at the splitting of the confederation, Monmousseau and Co. would have had to reckon with broader masses. This fact alone would have disciplined their bureaucratic adventurism. That is why the advantages of unity would have been immeasurably greater at present than the disadvantages. If, within the united confederation embracing about a million workers, the revolutionary wing remains in the minority for a year or two, these two years would be undoubtedly more fruitful for the education not only of the Communist trade unionists, but for the whole party, than five years of "independent" zig-zags in a U. G. C. of L. growing constantly weaker.

No, it is not we, but the reformists, who should fear trade union unity. If they consent to a unity congress—not in words but in fact—that would create the possibility of bringing the labor movement in France out of the blind alley. But that is just why the reformists will not consent to it.

The conditions of the crisis are creating the greatest difficulties for the reformists, primarily in the trade union field. That is why they find it so necessary to take shelter behind their Left flank; it is

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Seasonal Improvement -- Where? Weekly by July 1

The hope of American capitalism in the Spring period to indicate definite signs of a return from the crisis appears shattered, now that this period has come and gone with but a scant rise and an immediate recession. The decline of industry reached the lowest point in the crisis, at the end of January, when the index stood at 74.5. While this is not the lowest position of industry in the economic history of the country, according to the *Annalist*, (the year 1892, with an index of 72.0, is the lowest point), it marks the worst crisis experienced by United States capitalism since its appearance as an imperialist power.

Seasonal Rise Slight

The Spring seasonal upturn was a slight one. Increased activity was witnessed in most industries, but almost all without exception have again declined, with the prospect of a continuation of this decline with the coming slack of summer months. Thus the end of the first quarter finds the basic industries in depressed conditions, with a great instability in the other trades. The steel industry has declined steadily and at the time of this writing is working 48 and a half percent, of capacity. This present low in steel indicates a similar condition among its chief customers, namely, automobile and railroad. Automobile production dropped to 68.0 at the close of April, which marked a decline of 17.9 points from the December index. Freight car loadings which stood at 80.0 at the end of December, rose slightly during the Spring period, and has now also begun a downward curve—at the end of March the index was at 77.0. Bituminous coal production suffered a drop of 5.9 since the beginning of the year, while drops are also recorded for electric power production and the entire metal industry over the same period.

The most illuminating picture of the depth of the crisis exists in the foreign trade balance, which serves as a barometer in estimating the present situation. A key-note of the crisis is sounded here. In the year 1930 a decline two and three-quarter billions of dollars was experienced in foreign trade. This decline continues at an identical pace. The figures given below represent the foreign trade for the first quarters of the years, 1929, 1930 and 1931. (N. Y. Times of April 26, 1931)

Jan., Feb., March	Jan., Feb., March
Exports	Imports
1929—\$1,396,580,000	1929—\$1,122,156,000
1930—\$1,110,300,000	1930—\$ 893,136,000
1931—\$ 697,543,000	1931—\$ 567,847,000

A recapitulation of these figures will show a decline in 1931 of \$1,813,390,000 and \$738,046,000, from the years 1929, and 1930, respectively. Without its penetration and domination in the sphere of world economy, the phenomenal growth of U. S. capitalism would be unthinkable. It came only as a result of its hegemony over international capitalism. Its very progress today depends upon its continued domination of world economy. The international crisis of capitalism however found its reaction in the United States; so connected is national economy with international economy.

It is precisely here that American capitalism make its most determined efforts to rise out of the crisis. It is of utmost importance to remember that the previous upturn march of U. S. capitalism and its present strength lies primarily in its dominant position in the world market, and as this condition can only be maintained upon the continuation of that rôle, we will witness the chief attempts of U. S. capitalism to extricate itself from the crisis by an evermore intensified aggression in the field of foreign trade. Comrade Trotsky, in his criticism of the program of the Communist International for failure to consider the United States and its rôle in world capitalism, wrote in 1928, that:

"In a critical epoch the hegemony of the United States will prove even more complete, more open, more ruthless, than in a period of boom".

The preparation for this policy is taking place now.

With ITS OWN two levers (the "international" lever and the "national" lever by which it maintains itself) capitalism is planning to issue from the crisis. At present the "national" lever, that of increasing the exploitation of its own working class, is being put to work, and is subjecting the American working class to increased misery and poverty. The slight rise during the Spring period liquidated no appreciable amount of the unemployed army, now numbering about 10 million. On the contrary the offensive against the working class is proceeding at an intensified scale.

Wage Cuts Increased

At present, under the leadership of the banks, the American capitalists are planning to institute a nation-wide campaign of

wage cuts. But this "plan" to institute wage cuts is actually in effect today, and the tendency has been increasing since the second half of the year 1930. The following figures of the Standard Statistics Corporation indicate the process in this direction:

1930	
No. of Wage Cuts	
1st Quarter	25
2nd "	60
3rd "	110
4th "	335
Total	530

The available figures for 1931 shows that the first quarter of this year will prove higher than the entire year of 1930. In January of this year the Standard Statistics Corporation estimates 355 wage cuts, while the U. S. Dept. of Labor states that there were 340 decreases. In addition to wage cuts, the rise in productivity as against the rise in wages over the past ten years shows the declining position of the working class. The N. Y. Times, of April 26, 1931, points out that over a period of ten years the increase of productivity was 48.5 percent, as against an increase of 24.3 percent, in real wages, and that for the years 1927-29, the rise in the value of manufacturing stood at 9.1 percent, as against a 3.9 percent in wages.

Thus the 1st quarter of 1931 passed. The crisis continues much to the amazement of the capitalist economic experts and leaders in industry who cannot see anything "fundamentally wrong with capitalism". The coming year will see the offensive of capitalism increased on an international and national scale. For the organization of a counter offensive the Communists must now prepare themselves.

—ALBERT GLOTZER.

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the Militant by increasing by dozens and hundreds the number of our subscribers. Every one of our comrades must concentrate upon obtaining the largest possible number of subscriptions so that our Sub. Drive may be brought to a successful conclusion.

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The Question of Trade Union Unity

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the courtiers of unity who offer them this shelter. To unmask the splitting work of the reformists and the parasitism of the Monattists is now one of the most important and indispensable tasks. The slogan of the unity congress can attribute greatly to the solution of this task. When the Monattists speak of unity, they aim this slogan against the Communists; when the U. G. C. of L. will itself propose a road to unity, it will deliver a mortal blow to the Monattists and will weaken the reformists. Isn't this quite clear?

It is true that we know in advance that thanks to the resistance of the reformists, the slogan of unity will not yield the great results at present that would be obtained in the case of a real unity of the trade union organizations. But a more limited result, on the condition of a correct policy by the Communists, will undoubtedly be achieved. The broad masses of the workers will see who is really for unity and who is against it, and will convince themselves that the services of courtiers are not required. There is no doubt that in the long run the Monattists will feel itself stronger, and the G. C. of L. weaker and more unstable.

But if that is how matters stand, then does it not amount—not to the realization of an effective unity—but only to a maneuver? This objection cannot frighten us. This is the manner in which the reformists especially evaluate our whole policy of the united front: they declare that our proposals are a maneuver only because they themselves do not want to lead the struggle.

It would be entirely false to make any difference in principle between the policy of the united front and that of the fusion of the trade union organizations. Provided that the Communists preserve the complete independence of their party, of their fraction in the trade unions, of their whole policy, the fusion of the confederations is nothing but a form of the policy of the united front, a more extended and broader form. In rejecting our proposal, the reformists transform it into a "maneuver". But on our part, it is a legitimate and indispensable "maneuver"; it is such maneuvers that train the working masses.

The Executive Committee of the Ligue, we say again, is entirely correct when it urgently repeats that unity of action cannot be postponed until the unification of the trade union organizations. This idea must be developed as it has been heretofore, explained and applied in practice. But this does not exclude the duty of posing boldly, at a definite and well-chosen moment, the question of the fusion of the confederations (or even of single federations).

The whole question consists of knowing if the Communist leadership is now capable of effecting such a bold maneuver. The future will show. But if the party and the leadership of the U. G. C. of L. today refuse to follow the advice of the Ligue—which is most probable—it may well be that they will be obliged to follow it tomorrow. It is superfluous to add that we make no fetish of trade union unity. We postpone no question of struggle until the unity. It is not a question for us of a panacea, but of a lesson in specific and important things which must be taught to the workers who have forgotten or who do not know the past.

For participation in the unity congress, we do not of course put any conditions of principle.

When the courtiers of unity, who are not ashamed of cheap phrases, say that the united confederation must base itself upon the principle of the class struggle, etc., they are doing verbal acrobatics in the interests of the opportunists. As if a serious man could ask Jonhau and Co. to tread, in the name of unity with the Communists, the road of the class struggle which these gentlemen have deliberately abandoned in the name of unity with the bourgeoisie. And just what do these courtiers themselves, all these Monattes, Zyromskis and Dumoullins, understand by the "class struggle"? No, we are ready at any moment to stand on the grounds of trade union unity, not in order to "correct" (with the aid of charlatan formulae) the mercenariness of capital, but in order to tear the workers away from their traitorous influence. The only conditions that we put have the character of organizational guarantees of trade union democracy, first of all the freedom of criticism for the minority, naturally on the condition that it submits to trade union discipline. We ask for nothing else and on our part we promise nothing more.

Let us imagine that the party, even if not immediately, follows our advice. How should the Central Committee act? It would first of all be obliged carefully to prepare within the party the plan of the campaign, to examine it in all the trade union fractions in accordance with local trade union conditions, so that the slogan of unity might be effectively directed simultaneously from above and from below. Only after a careful preparation and elaboration, after having eliminated all doubts and misunderstandings in its own ranks, does the leadership of the Unitary Confederation address itself to the leadership of the reformist Confederation with concretely elaborated proposals: to create a party commission for the preparation, within a period of two months for example, of the trade union unification congress to which all the trade union organizations of the

country must have access. Simultaneously, the local Unitary organizations address themselves to the local reformist organizations with the same proposal, formulated with precision and concreteness.

The Communist party develops a broad agitation in the country, supporting and explaining the initiative of the U. G. C. of L. The attention of the broadest circles of workers, and primarily that of the Confederation workers must for a certain time be concentrated on the simple idea that the Communists propose to realize immediately the organizational unity of the trade union organizations. Whatever the attitude of the reformists may be, whatever may be the ruses to which they resort, the Communists will come out of this campaign with profit, even if it is only reduced, for the first time, to a demonstration.

The struggle in the name of the united front does not cease, during this period, for a single minute. The Communists continue to attack the reformists in the provinces and in the center, supporting themselves upon the growing activity of the workers, renewing all their offers of fighting actions on the basis of the policy of the united front, unmasking the reformists, strengthening their own ranks, etc. And it may well happen that in six months, in a year or two, the Communists will be obliged to repeat again their proposal of fusion of the trade union confederations and, by that, put the reformists in a position that is more difficult than the first time.

The real Bolshevik policy must have precisely this character which is at once offensive, bold and maneuverist. It is only by this road that the movement can be preserved from stagnation, purged of parasitic formations, and the evolution of the working class towards the revolution accelerated.

The lesson proposed above has no meaning and cannot succeed unless the initiative comes from the U. G. C. of L. and the Communist party. The task of the Ligue does not consist, naturally, of advancing independently the slogan of the unity congress, pitting itself against the Unitary Confederation as well as against the reformist Confederation. The task of the Ligue is to push the official party and the U. G. C. of L. on the road of a bold united front policy and to stimulate them—on the basis of this policy—to carry out at a propitious moment—and in the future there will be many such moments—a decisive offensive for the fusion of the trade union organizations.

In order to fulfill its tasks towards the party, the Ligue—and this is its first duty—must align its own ranks in the field of the trade union movement. It is a task that cannot be postponed. It must and will be solved.