

FOCUS ON UNION ESTABLISHMENTS

1. UNIONS AND THE WAR IN VIETNAM

Anne P. Draper

AT THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR CONVENTION in 1953, a policy declaration stated: "The right to dissent, to object and to protest, the right to speak freely, . . . are among the fundamental rights of man. . . . On their exercise and devotion to them the American labor movement is built."

The right to dissent is not conspicuously practiced within the trade union movement. Constant fulminations against the totalitarian practices of Communist countries and their controlled unions, while substantially true, are coupled with practices that are often good imitations of monolithic regimes. Critics and dissenters face vicious hostility in most cases, if not victimization or even outright expulsion.

For years, while every segment of the population had its critics of the war in Vietnam and dissent was openly voiced by students, intellectuals, clergymen and just concerned citizens, the position of some 15 million trade-unionists organized in the AFL-CIO appeared to be that of President George Meany and his foreign-policy adviser Jay Lovestone.

The reactionary policies of the Meany-Lovestone axis gave a blank check to Johnson's escalation of the war in Vietnam. These policies are to the right of the Chamber of Commerce on recognizing China. Abroad, Lovestone's operatives generally have worked in alliance with reactionary forces to push State Department policies in unions.

The December 1965 convention of the AFL-CIO held in San Francisco marked a low point. Walter Reuther, president of the Auto Workers Union, thought he had scored a great "victory" behind the scenes when he succeeded in eliminating the worst features of the original Lovestone resolution on Vietnam, and turned it into one that *simply* called for full and uncritical support to Johnson's policies.

The discussion on the resolution was a deadly commentary on the stagnation within labor's top brass. A substantial group, including top union officials, had already expressed doubts about further escalation of the war and its impact on domestic policies and had called for peace negotiations. Yet, with the exception of UAW's Emil Mazey and one other, no protesting voices were raised, and the vote for the resolution was almost unanimous.

The critics rationalized their shameful silence: their unions had not taken a stand on Vietnam; they could only speak as individuals, and they would be pilloried if they did so; Meany and Co. would retaliate

against their unions in inter-union problems and disputes; and so the excuses went, from top leaders in major unions. The free labor movement, as they like to call it, lacked the freedom to discuss and challenge an immoral and disastrous war.

Above all, the political commitments to the Democratic Party and the Johnson administration acted to gag the dissenters on Vietnam policy. During the 1964 presidential campaign, they had beaten the drums against Barry Goldwater as a reckless warmonger; but when Johnson adopted and extended Goldwater's sabre-rattling, they were tongue-tied.

Following the AFL-CIO convention, in February 1966, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America was the first international union in the federation to voice its dissatisfaction by official action of its General Executive Board. The carefully restrained statement called for democratic discussion of the issues involved, opposed further escalation of the war, and urged a negotiated peace.

Amalgamated leaders, long active in various peace movements, played a leading role in establishing the Trade Union Division of the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. The formation of the Trade Union Division at a founding conference in New York City on May 3, 1966 marked the demonstrative open break of a significant group of AFL-CIO leaders with the Meany-Lovestone policies.

At the conference, some 200 labor representatives from 30 local unions affiliated with 21 international unions acknowledged that labor had been conspicuously silent in the debate on Vietnam policy. They adopted a policy statement asserting: "Trade-unionists have a special responsibility to contribute to this discussion. Our aspirations to help build a 'Great Society' at home in a peaceful world are placed in jeopardy by the increasing tempo of American involvement in the war."

The policy statement called for raising the issues of war and peace within the unions—at union meetings and in the labor press. Increasingly the union questions about the wisdom of Johnson's policy appeared in the union press. The secretary-treasurer of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters union, Patrick Gorman, repeatedly editorialized against the tragedy of the Vietnam war: "To save humanity instead of destroying it should be our goal. . . . We should get the hell out of it!"

The logjam was broken. Later that month conventions of three international unions adopted resolutions critical of the war to varying degrees. The sharpest was adopted by the United Packinghouse Workers Union, and had been submitted by their International Executive Board. Their president, Ralph Helstein, spoke strongly against the bombing of cities and civilians and the mining of harbors.

The Packinghouse resolution, adopted after full floor debate, declared: "The basic and urgent objective of our national policy

should be to end the war in Vietnam." It called upon the United States to "deal in good faith with any and all nations and groups . . . and proclaim our willingness to halt all bombings and join in an immediate 'cease fire.'"

Meeting the same week as the Packinghouse Union, the United Auto Workers Union took a much weaker stance. It merely urged more strenuous efforts to negotiate a peaceful end to the war and called for the recognition of China and its admission into the United Nations. The resolution did not hit the convention floor until the end of the sessions, on Saturday morning, when over half the delegates had left for home.

UAW Secretary-Treasurer Emil Mazey was one of the two speakers on the resolution in a desultory discussion. He called for a national conference of UAW members on the issue, plus regional conferences. He defended the right of some two dozen young peace demonstrators who had waved anti-intervention placards when Johnson addressed the convention by phone.

At the convention of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America held in New York City later that month, the issue of Vietnam dominated the speeches and the convention. Secretary-General U Thant of the United Nations delivered his sharpest attack on American policy in his first major address before a labor convention. He urged a scaling down of American military operations in Vietnam, the utilization of the United Nations in peace endeavors, and called for direct negotiations with all powers concerned, including China and the National Liberation Front.

He received a standing ovation and set the stage for the adoption of a resolution calling for similar steps. The resolution rejected the policy of escalation and called for persistent negotiations until peace is achieved. It specifically saluted the critics of Vietnam policy (condemned by the AFL-CIO Maritime Trades Department as irresponsible) and called for debate and discussion.

The resolution urged world-wide disarmament to "free the billions of dollars now spent for arms which should be spent for food and shelter and books and hospitals . . . abundance will be only a dream while all nations spend half or more of their national income on the weapons of war."

The union's most outspoken critic of Vietnam policy, its Secretary-Treasurer Frank Rosenblum, lashed out at U.S. foreign and domestic policy, charging that the war was immoral and could lead to total destruction of mankind. He charged: "We are supposed to be fighting for freedom, but the question is: freedom from whom? We are not wanted there and we cannot possibly win the war in Vietnam." Going further than most union critics, he proposed that the U.S. withdraw from Vietnam.

None of the resolutions specifically singled out and attacked Johnson for his escalation of the war. (One can only imagine how vitriolically they would have been written had Goldwater won the presidency and carried out his more restrained proposal of "defoliation!") Nor was there any hint that support to the Democratic Party and its candidates might be affected by their crimes against humanity.

But the moderate tone and restrained appeals of the dissenters did not save them from the raging response of the AFL-CIO leadership at a meeting following these conventions. The AFL-CIO Executive Council reaffirmed its policy of uncritical and all-out support to Johnson (even though some of them felt he was not hawkish enough) and then took a McCarthy-type slap at the dissenters: "While a minority has the right to dissent from the majority, disruption by even a well-meaning minority can only pollute and poison the bloodstream of our democracy."

This blatant move to silence the growing opposition within AFL-CIO unions was promptly denounced by Reuther, who had been absent from the session. He termed it: "intemperate, hysterical, jingoistic, and unworthy of a policy statement of a free labor movement." He was silent, however, about the more important policy issues on Vietnam.

THE TRADE UNION DIVISION of SANE responded to this crude attempt to intimidate critics by asserting that its activities were in keeping with the finest democratic traditions of the labor movement—the traditions of free discussion and debate—and called upon others who share its views to speak out and assert their moral leadership and independence.

Moving a bit further beyond the broad statement of its founding conference, the TUD adopted a policy position calling for a cease-fire, an immediate stop to the bombing of North Vietnam, and the opening of negotiations with all parties to the war in Vietnam. It further called upon trade-unionists in other cities to form chapters of the Trade Union Division.

In a few cities trade-union members set up various committees and organizations—sometimes with heavy pro-Soviet and pro-Peking influence, and dominated by members of independent unions outside the AFL-CIO. But they made little headway into the AFL-CIO mainstream.

Within recent months, in two cities—Chicago and Los Angeles—trade-unionists have organized chapters of the Trade Union Division of SANE, and created a new channel by which labor opposition to the war in Vietnam could be organized. These two conferences were significant milestones in arousing the labor movement of these cities and challenging the Johnson-Meany line.

The Chicago conference was held on December 17, sponsored by the newly organized Chicago chapter. Close to 400 trade-union officers and members from 21 different unions attended the conference, coming from

Chicago and nearby midwestern cities. The keynote speaker was Chicago-based Frank Rosenblum, of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, which had the largest contingent of workers there. In addition, there was a wide representation from midwestern unions. Among those in attendance: the secretary-treasurer of the Illinois State Federation of Labor; the vice-president and other top officers of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters; area officers and members of the United Auto Workers, the Packinghouse Workers, the United Shoe Workers, the Building Service Union, and many others.

Speakers challenged the Johnson policy by name and with specifics. The conference's chairman, Murray Finley of the Clothing Workers, stated at a press conference: "Meany and Johnson do not reflect the thinking of the American people" and "never before in American history has there been so little enthusiasm for fighting a war."

Packinghouse President Ralph Helstein summed up the conference proceedings, which had included several panel and workshop sessions. He evaluated the conference as an important reassertion of labor's historic role in the search for a peaceful world. He urged the linking of the civil rights, labor and peace movements if the march to destruction was to be stopped.

THE FOLLOWING MONTH—January 19, 1967—witnessed the formation of the Los Angeles chapter of the Trade Union Division. An impressive list of Los Angeles labor leaders (some three-quarters of a million union members live in that metropolis) signed the call for the meeting, stating that "We in the labor movement have a special responsibility to union members and to the public to speak out on vital issues."

The meeting was chaired by UAW West Coast Regional Director Paul Schrade, and the keynote speaker was the Amalgamated's West Coast Vice President Leonard Levy. Both are well-known critics of the war in Vietnam and strong supporters of the Berkeley University of California activists, both at the time of the Free Speech Movement and the more recent strike.

Other union leaders signing the call included representatives from the Teamsters Union, the Longshore and Warehousemen's Union, United Packinghouse Workers, the Teachers Union, the State, County and Municipal Employees, and the Social Workers Union—in the main former CIO unions.

Schrade put the problem bluntly to some 150 trade unionists who attended the founding meeting: "The AFL-CIO completely supports the war in Vietnam. Meany and his foreign policy adviser, Jay Lovestone, wanted a much bigger war. . . . We need to work out a strategy that changes AFL-CIO policy."

Levy linked the domestic debacles with the war: "The declared

War on Poverty has become the victim of the undeclared war in Vietnam." He presented a Statement of Purpose which denounced the war and spelled out specific steps to end it.

The Statement declares: "We are opposed to a further escalation of the fighting in Vietnam. We support the proposals of U Thant that there be an immediate cease-fire in South Vietnam; that we stop our bombing in North Vietnam and that we proceed to negotiate with all of the principals engaged in this struggle. In this, we include the National Liberation Front. We propose further that funds now being allocated to Vietnam be devoted to meet the needs of our poor."

Several unionists indicated that their own position went further than this—for withdrawal now. About twenty-five different unions were represented, and plans were made to continue expansion of the chapter and further activities to carry the discussion into union meetings and conventions. An officer of the California State Federation of Teachers reported that at their state convention at Christmas time, the delegates had adopted a resolution protesting American intervention in Vietnam as destructive of democratic values both in Vietnam and at home. Their resolution stated: "That this convention oppose the present Johnson administration policy in Vietnam. That we seek a United States withdrawal of military forces from Vietnam and end of all military aid to Vietnam. Furthermore, we call for an immediate end to all bombing of North and South Vietnam." The position was heartily applauded.

Discussions are currently being held in other cities across the country with the aim of setting up Trade Union Divisions of SANE. The growing opposition to the war is seeking outlets, and the development of a large trade-union sector of such an opposition can be important. At this stage there are still cross-currents and cross-purposes that need ironing out. Where both a SANE Trade Union Division and an unaffiliated group of "trade-unionists for peace" exist, questions of cooperation or merger naturally arise. There is always the question of how far a Trade Union Division group is willing to go, whether it merely takes a cautious stance for "negotiations" or moves closer to calling for withdrawal of U.S. troops now, or some other point in the spectrum in-between.

In one locality, the San Francisco Bay Area, SANE spokesmen like field representative Mary Temple as well as Robert Pickus have even resisted the setting up of a Trade Union Division. They favor the more conservative approach of organizing trade-unionists in groups less committed than SANE to definite anti-war opposition.

At any rate, the Meany-Lovestone freeze on cold-warriorship in the trade-union movement is indubitably thawing. The organized labor movement may once again become a factor not only in domestic policy but also in fighting the disastrous foreign policy of the American establishment.

2. FORCES BEHIND THE REUTHER-MEANY SPLIT

Stanley Weir

WALTER REUTHER'S LONG UNCOMFORTABLE ACCOMMODATION to AFL-CIO President George Meany appears to be terminating. Reuther's sudden resignation, on February 3, as first vice president of the AFL-CIO has created the potential of complete disaffiliation from that body by the United Automobile Workers and stimulates the hope that a new and more vital labor confederation may be born. The existence of a parent central labor body that is receptive to, and an aggressive proponent of, democratic social change is an obvious need. The 1955 merger of the AFL and the CIO was a failure. Its major accomplishment was to increase the size of the AFL and Meany's power to carry out conservative policies. Conversely, it facilitated the near extinction of what was left of the more militant and socially progressive CIO attitudes in the upper echelons of the American labor movement.

Late last year the Reuther-Meany conflict over foreign policy allowed the public its first knowledge of a serious rift in the top leadership of the AFL-CIO. Reuther openly objected when AFL-CIO delegates to a European labor conference walked out because delegates from Communist-bloc countries were seated. Meany sanctioned the action. The December 28, 1966, UAW Administrative Letter explained, however, that contrary to the impression created by the press, the UAW's disagreements with Meany's policies did not "derive solely and exclusively from differences over international affairs." After calling attention to the UAW's record of "continuous and successful struggle against communism and all other forms of totalitarianism," the letter stated that Meany's leadership "suffers from a sense of complacency and adherence to the status quo and is not fulfilling the basic aims and purposes which prompted the merger of the AFL-CIO."

The letter's characterization of Meany's leadership is succinct and accurate. It was true five years ago, ten years ago and every day of the almost twelve year old merger, and the truth was until recently tolerated in silence. The biggest part of the cost for the silence maintained by Reuther and the many other members on the AFL-CIO Executive Council has been borne by the ranks of labor. The characterization is read with satisfaction, but satisfies few as an explanation for Reuther's 1967 rift with Meany.

There are labor journalists who have speculated that it was Reuther's concern over his place in labor history that made it impossible for him to wait any longer for Meany to retire and vacate the top office. Others have suggested that his threat to split away from the AFL-CIO is a maneuver designed to increase his bargaining power within that body.