

IMPROVE OUR BASEBUILDING

Summary of a PLP National Committee Meeting Discussion,
January 1969

At our founding convention in 1965 we made a decisive turn in vowing to become a party of the working class, and we went to work. We said—and still say—that the working class, especially its industrial segment, is the key force for revolution in the U.S. It is that group which, potentially, holds decisive power in a modern capitalist country. And recently we have refined that to demonstrate that currently in the U.S. Black workers are a decisive factor within the industrial working class.

But because our party may have 50% or 60% or even 90% of its members working in trade unions does not necessarily mean that we will have become a proletarianized or working class party. While we have concluded that the objective conditions are certainly ripe and full of class struggle out of which workers can be recruited to our party, whom have we been recruiting? It is mainly teachers, welfare workers and students, independent radicals and professionals. This is good, and should increase. But whom have we NOT been recruiting? Industrial workers (except in rare instances).

Generally we have traced the reason for this imbalance to "objective conditions": young professionals are recently off the campuses, "hot-beds of radicalism," and are more open immediately to radical ideas. Industrial workers are more removed from the radical, anti-war movement and therefore not as prone to listen to our advanced ideology. But if these industrial workers are not being won to that ideology, then the whole thesis of the role of the working class breaks down, assuming objective conditions are favorable to their being won.

There is a gap—a subjective gap—between our party and the industrial workers. We think the thesis of the industrial workers being decisive and our being able to win them to Marxism-Leninism is valid. It is we who have not been equal to that task. While we have been growing quantitatively in the unions, we are not qualitatively changing into a working class party. And, in fact, if the qualitative change does not occur, the quantitative change can easily turn into its opposite and we can either begin to lose members and/or easily become moribund like the revisionist CP.

Getting people into auto or steel or transportation is important, but it is far from the whole story. It is really just the barest beginning. There are at least two main reasons why we have not really gone beyond that point: (1) based on our predominantly middle class background we tend to more easily relate to middle class problems and set up rigid barriers to dealing with working class problems; and (2) we have not really recognized the POLITICAL nature of establishing close ties with, especially, industrial workers.

(1) One of the reasons that our people have been able to recruit many more teachers and welfare workers is that our members doing the recruiting have backgrounds similar to many of those being recruited and therefore are more ready to deal with the kind of problems—essentially middle class—that these professional workers have. This is not bad, necessarily, especially if the politics of the recruitment is at a high level, and, also, if it grows out of struggle against the boss or the system. But many of our members who are working among industrial workers also come from middle class backgrounds and are not yet ready to come to grips with the kinds of problems these workers have—which take a different form than the ones our members are used to—and therefore set up a far more rigid line on recruiting them to the party than do those working with professional workers.

For example, not only do we spend far more time in deal-

ing with the problems of members with middle class backgrounds; we also tend to bring them into the party with these problems on the grounds that we will continue the struggle there, provided their “political line” is good. So if a prospective member feels the need of a psychiatrist, or has been living with a man or woman for a couple of years without resolving the situation by marriage or splitting up, or tends to live a somewhat bohemian life—all problems relatively foreign to industrial workers—we tend to mount a struggle on these middle class-oriented problems, even as we draw them closer and into the party. But if workers run around with other women (or men) or drink heavily, or “watch TV all the time,” or any other aspect of life that ruling class ideology engenders in workers—a wall gets set up between our members and these workers which not only rule them out “for the foreseeable future” as party recruits, but tends to prevent us talking (or doing) politics with them because they are somehow beyond our rigid (middle class) specifications of who can join the party. We don’t think of these workers as prospective—and actual—recruits with whom we will wage a protracted struggle, to change their bad habits (just the same as we would do with the weaknesses of middle class people or students whom we recruit). And therefore we tend less to bring them our line and win them to it.

There are numerous examples of this, of members with middle class backgrounds having gone to work in industrial situations, and reinforcing the barriers between themselves and their fellow workers rather than trying to remold themselves and break down these barriers. One member worked two years without ever seeing any worker socially off the job (although this has started to change, but a fight is still to be waged to have this member really immerse himself in the working class). Another member criticized a fellow worker for “going out with other guys” while she had a boyfriend. But our member, at that time, was living with a guy (a nice, comfortable arrangement) without having to face the problems of her fellow worker (who was not living with her boyfriend) and could then take a “holier-than-thou” attitude.

Yet she wasn't aware of the double standard of male-female relations she was adopting towards her fellow worker, stemming from the class differences in their ways of life.

Still another member who had worked for many years before coming into the party had all the problems of a single worker in his forties. On the one hand we rarely, if ever, struggled with him on these problems. Secondly, we allowed his bad politics to go on unchecked within the club for a long time (since "he had long trade union experience" and "we'd better look after newer people"). Then, when the bad politics became predominant in the club (and union) situation, we tied that to his personal weaknesses, proposed he not be chairman, whereupon he quit. Now there is a thin line between being liberal on politics and engaging in protracted struggle with someone. The point is, here we never engaged in any real political struggle—more or less left this guy alone, based on his previous union experience—and then found ourselves at a point where he felt pushed to the wall and not prepared to wage any kind of struggle. So we lost him.

Now, this brings up another point. Even if we recruit workers who have spent all their lives in a working class situation, what's to say they'll stay in the party once they're recruited? What kind of problems do our clubs deal with now? Supposing one such worker were to come to our next club meeting; how do you think he'd react to what's being talked about? Would the high degree of intellectualizing that goes on in many club discussions scare him or her away? Have we become that close to and really immersed in the problems of workers around us so that we are prepared to deal with them, wage a long-range struggle with them, involve them in joint struggle, bring them our politics, learn from their much longer experience in the class struggle, and bring them into the party?

(2) Our efforts at having all our members fight for a political base for the party's line on the job has started to bear some fruit. Many more members are raising many political questions for discussion with their fellow workers:

racism, the war, the state, socialism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, etc. Many more members have begun to give our literature to their fellow workers especially among industrial workers. And more of our members have begun to tell workers that they are in PL and why, what that means. Furthermore, this has been done in a number of instances while going through real class battles together. Yet when the question of establishing unbreakable ties with these workers is brought up, many of our members nod agreement but at the same time feel somehow that this is not really political (just a means to a political end). When it is raised that one important reason why workers don't defend our members—whom they know to be communists and are friendly with—when they get fired is that our members don't have unbreakable ties with their fellow workers (the workers don't really feel our member is part of them)—then our reaction is usually that this is not the reason, that there is something "more political" that is missing. Yet what could be more political than workers defending a communist—knowing him or her to be one—based on the feeling that this person is so much a part of them, so inextricably woven into their lives, that they just can't sit by and do nothing, that they HAVE to fight for his or her job? Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean that the fight will win—but at least it will take place.

Developing close personal-political ties with our fellow workers is one of THE MOST POLITICAL THINGS WE CAN DO, provided, of course, it goes along with the raising of our line, the party's program. But we, paradoxically, seem to be doing more of the latter than the former. And maybe this is because we haven't actually changed our life style, the friends we have, the time we spend with people in PL as against time spent with our fellow workers, and the QUALITY of the time spent with our fellow workers. If we don't reorient, especially toward industrial workers, we'll never recruit them to the party, or if we manage to recruit some, we won't hold them, and, ultimately, as we put forward our political line and draw attacks from the ruling class, the workers won't find the overwhelming need to maintain

us among them. Of course, that might sound "non-political" ("they're defending us because we're their best friends") but, in reality, if we don't develop that kind of relationship, we won't get close enough to workers to understand and work with their problems (which in many cases are different than our members have experienced); we won't win them into the party; and those that we do win, we won't hold. In other words, we won't become a working class party, but will continue to recruit only professional workers with middle class problems and outlook, and there won't be any proletarian section of our party to help these members become more identified with the industrial working class, more proletarianized.

We aren't saying that we shouldn't continue to work among non-industrial workers, students, etc. We aren't saying these areas are not important for our political struggle. But we are saying that if a decisive turn isn't made among industrial workers, the recruitment of even those professional unionists will begin to turn into its opposite, draw the party into thinking that is the main area of political work, spend all our time there, get no real proletarian character to the party (the "new working class" stuff), and won't develop a real party of the working class. And how many years do we have in which to do this? How long can we go along in our present condition without recruiting industrial workers without turning into a party dominated by middle class ideas, backgrounds, problems—and solutions?

A lot more concentrated effort must be made by the party leadership among our comrades in this area, giving their own past experiences and raising more pointed, detailed questions about the members' relations with their fellow workers. A plan of work is to be developed in each club and industry, against which each member is to be held accountable. An examination of each comrade as to whether realistic possibilities exist for he or she to re-mold himself into a person more closely related to the workers around him; and if not, to what kind of other situation should he be shifted in which a better possibility exists (if it exists

at all) and whether the comrade should turn to another area of work from which an important political contribution can be gotten. A list of every worker to which we have a relation should be made; what the level of our base is with them; how we intend to pursue it to a point where they can be recruited. Examine searchingly how we spend our lives and how that relates to the workers around us; what kind of personal-political lives we lead. What do we consider the barriers between us and these workers? Do we have double standards for recruiting?