

INVOLVING WORKERS IN THE MOVEMENT

PROPOSAL TO THE UNIONS

Writing in the August issue of the Movement, Jack Minnis disputes what he calls the "coalition theorists" who argue that the civil rights movement, in his terms, needs "to snuggle up close to Lyndon's Labor organizations." He continues, "The theory is that, if Negroes are to get what they want, being a minority of only 10% of the population, they're going to have to have allies." These allies, the theory goes, are in the unions. But, Minnis argues, the unions are among the haves, protecting the interests of the haves, uninterested in the have-nots and, in some cases, hostile to the have-nots who are now making demands that could threaten the interests of the unions.

To prove that the unions are hopelessly lost, Minnis, drawing heavily from a recent article by Sid Lens in the Nation, portrays the international role of the AFL-CIO as an anti-revolutionary force working closely with the CIA and other governmental agencies designed to keep the underdeveloped countries from gaining full political and economic independence. This is demonstrated, according to Minnis, by the source of funds for AFL-CIO's international projects and the influence of corporate directors with foreign investments in these labor projects.

UNIONS NOT MONOLITHIC

Whether Minnis' argument is true or not, the method he uses to persuade us is far from convincing. In the first place, the unions are not monoliths. While Meany-Lovestone may define the AFL-CIO's international role, there are voices in organized labor that make, mild to be granted, protests.

Second, if we judged who was run by who contributed we would have to conclude that SNCC, because it draws heavily from middle-class white support in the North, is run by middle-class whites. Southern Negroes fighting on the front lines in the MFLU? MFLU? Poor Peoples Corporation, Farmers Alliances, freedom schools and community centers have come to a different conclusion.

Third, and related to the first point, is the fact that within the unions there are organized blocs of Negroes and low-paid whites who are pushing for something new to happen in the unions. These trade unionists, largely found in the unskilled and service occupations, are beginning to feel the pressure of automation. They are also aware that friends and relatives are without work and they bear this message into the unions. In the Laborers, Hospital workers, Steelworkers, Auto and others, there are Negro caucuses pushing in uncertain directions, but looking for new ideas with which to move.

Fourth, the unions, like the corporations and the government, are not immune to the pressures placed on them by the civil rights movement. The NAACP's Herbert Hill has led a drive on union discrimination at the national level. Local CORE chapters and action committees around the country cause the unions concern.

The unions, unlike government or business, have a basic problem which Minnis mentions but seems to dismiss. In his words, "the labor organizations don't even pretend to represent anybody except their members who have jobs and can pay dues, and that representation is often more pretense than reality." But this is to ignore their problem: how to deal with an expanding labor force and a shrinking job market.

This is not the civil rights movement's problem and the civil rights movement has, by and large, been satisfied to demand equal unemployment.

In the absence of some kind of program, Minnis is right--a coalition with the unions means giving up demands of unorganized Negroes and whites. Without a program, a coalition is dominated by the stronger force and at this time the unions gave much more money, more staff, and a much firmer entrenchment in the system than does the civil movement. (rights)

FOUR-STEP PROGRAM

Is there an alternative? I propose a framework for the discussion of a coalition--a coalition in which the demands of the Negro community for jobs, housing, schools and equal treatment would not get lost behind the hollow cry of "unity". I think that programs can be built around housing needs and social service needs of the ghetto.

STEP 1. Negro neighborhood (and Mexican-American and low income Anglo) community groups, leaders, etc., would develop an inventory of neighborhood needs: new low income housing, recreation facilities, paved streets, social services administered by the local community, and the like. Where traditional neighborhood organizations fail to do this, those unions with a large Negro, Mexican-American, or low income Anglo membership would organize their own membership according to residence and urge members who lived together in a neighborhood to take the initiative themselves.

STEP 2. The unions would support these demands because new jobs would be created as these needs were answered. The unions would also bargain for the inclusion of light-industry parks in replanned neighborhoods, these industries being a important way to stop the flow of work out of the unionized city into the non-union suburban, semi-rural or rural sections of the country. The unions would support the local initiatives from the neighborhood in exchange for the inclusion of permanent job opportunities in the light industry parks.

STEP 3. The neighborhood groups would insist upon certain terms before accepting the support of the unions. First, that a certain proportion, to be fixed in joint discussions, of the new jobs would be set aside for the unemployed of the neighborhood who would be brought into the job market through union apprentice programs, government training under MDTA, war on poverty, etc. Second, that final say in any program must remain in the hands of those who live in the neighborhood. Only with this veto power could the neighborhood interests prevail over the sometimes conflicting city-wide or state-wide or even national political and economic interests of some of the unions. Third, that the unions, through their pension and welfare funds, would make funds available to the neighborhood for the development of small housing cooperatives, small producer cooperatives, jointly sponsored neighborhood centers and so forth.

STEP 4. The unions would only conclude such agreements if the neighborhood supported programs for the creation of more jobs in the area of their jurisdiction. Thus a general program of public works might come out of the Alameda or San Francisco or Santa Clara Valley or Los Angeles County labor councils that would reflect the need for more jobs and the specific needs of particular neighborhoods for housing, services, or whatever would create those jobs. Further, this plan would retain in the neighborhood local initiative and leadership so that programs would not be imposed from above but developed by community organizations at the grass roots level.

Whether such planning is technically possible, I do not know. The problem, however, is not a technical one. It is, in the broadest sense, a political one. Not political in the Democratic vs. Republican sense -- there is little likelihood of initiatives from either of those sources -- but political in the sense that different interests must be brought together around a common program and that such a program must, if it is to deal with the tremendous sense of powerlessness, despair and frustration that leads to explosions like the Watts riot, come out of the communities; not be imposed by government bureaucracies or paternalistic social welfare agencies. When the political problem is solved, answers to technical questions will emerge.

It has never been clear to me why private agencies must be controlled by absentee, generally corporate, interests with no roots in the communities. The days of benevolent or not so benevolent colonialism are coming to an end. Yet, labor councils and locals throughout the nation continue to pour funds into Red Feather, Community Chest, United Fund, whatever they are called drives instead of demanding that social work services be placed under the direction of local leaders at the neighborhood level.

The Mississippi movement began in the plantations, towns and counties. It moved state-wide. It then challenged the nation with the Freedom Democratic Party. The process took four years. The problems of the North are deeper, more complex. We cannot solve them more quickly here. We can, however, begin to understand that problems will not be solved by any ideological elite studying the basic texts for utopia. Rather, they will be solved in the work and thoughts of people trying to build meaningful programs in the "other America".

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