

On the labor party question in the US

Jerry Isaacs
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Dear Editor,

I would like to make some additional points about a political and historical question raised by Shannon Jones's insightful review of the book *It didn't happen here: Why socialism failed in the United States*, posted on the *World Socialist Web Site* March 6.

The reviewer correctly debunks the book's basic assertion: that the absence in the US of a reformist labor party—similar to the British Labour Party, the Australian Labor Party or the New Democratic Party in Canada—proves the impossibility of socialism in America. As Jones points out, the book's authors, Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks, advance a social democratic and reformist conception of socialism and can hardly conceal their hostility to those who fought for the revolutionary perspective of international socialism in the American working class.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in their superficial review of the history of the working class movement in the US, Lipset and Marks ignore the one political tendency that fought consistently for decades for American workers to break from the Democratic Party and construct a labor party based on socialist policies, i.e., the Trotskyist movement. I would like, if only briefly, to review the content of this struggle and elaborate on why American Trotskyists for many years advocated the building of a labor party in the US.

The call for a labor party as advanced by the Trotskyist movement was fundamentally opposed to agitation for a social democratic or reformist party, along the lines of the British Labour Party. It was directly associated with the fight for socialist policies and the political independence of the working class, and a struggle against the labor bureaucracy and its Stalinist allies in the Communist Party. For the Trotskyist movement, the labor party demand was an important tactic derived from its international strategy of world socialist revolution.

Initially, in the early 1930s, the leadership of the Communist League of America (CLA), the Trotskyist movement at the time, opposed the demand for a labor

party. The CLA rejected the position of the Stalinist leadership of the Communist Party, which advocated a labor party in the late 1920s based on the premise that American workers would first have to pass through a reformist stage before they were ready for revolutionary politics.

Trotsky and the CLA leadership had a diametrically opposed viewpoint. They believed a radicalization of the working class would provide the revolutionary party with an opportunity to win the leadership of the most advanced workers and become the leading force in the trade unions through a direct struggle against the Stalinists. The call for a labor party under these circumstances, they believed, could head off the growth of the revolutionary party and its influence, and subordinate the working class to petty-bourgeois formations and capitalist third party movements.

The impact of the Great Depression in the US and the eruption of mass industrial strikes, which led to the rapid growth of the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), prompted Trotsky to reconsider the question of the labor party tactic. Union membership, which was under 3 million in 1933, soared in 1937 in the wake of the sit-down strikes in auto and other industries. By 1940 it had grown to 8.5 million, and the great mass of the newly unionized workers came from the ranks of the more exploited industrial laborers, as opposed to the skilled, craft workers who made up the membership of most of the old American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions.

The leadership of the new CIO was dominated by loyal servants of American capitalism—including such figures as United Mine Workers leader John L. Lewis and Amalgamated Clothing Workers head Sidney Hillman—and the new organization quickly moved to stifle the strivings of militant and left-wing workers for an independent political party of labor. Instead, the CIO gave its support to Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. The Stalinists of the Communist Party, who held leading positions in key CIO unions, promoted this policy of class

collaboration, in line with the Popular Front line pursued by the Kremlin from the mid-1930s to the signing of the Stalin-Hitler pact in August of 1939.

In opposition to the CIO leaders and Stalinists, Trotsky insisted that the American supporters of the Fourth International, united in the newly founded Socialist Workers Party, champion the fight for this explosive proletarian movement to take the road of independent class politics and not be limited to trade union reformism. In a 1938 letter to the SWP, entitled “The Problem of the Labor Party,” Trotsky called on the movement to adopt the labor party demand, saying, “If the class struggle is not to be crushed, replaced by demoralization, then the movement must find a new channel and this channel is political. That is the fundamental argument in favor of this slogan.”

Explaining his shift in tactics, Trotsky said the depth and scale of the economic collapse in the US had resulted in the semi-spontaneous growth of mass industrial unions more rapidly than he had anticipated. At the same time, the growth of the Trotskyist forces in the US proceeded more slowly, chiefly because of the defeats of the revolutionary struggles of the working class internationally, which resulted from the misleadership of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR.

Trotsky insisted that the SWP could not stand aside from this powerful movement of the working class—which included growing demands by rank-and-file workers for the unions to build their own party—and allow it to be diverted and crushed by the Stalinists and the anticommunist trade union officialdom. The labor party demand, when associated with a program of transitional and socialist demands, could serve as a political lever to clarify and win over the most advanced layers of the working class to a socialist perspective and pave the way for a revolutionary struggle against American capitalism. For Trotsky, the labor party demand was an instrument for building the influence and membership of the revolutionary party, the Fourth International, in the American working class.

The demand deepened the struggle against the CIO leaders and their Stalinist supporters, who were determined to keep the working class tied to Roosevelt and the Democratic Party and prevent the emergence of a political movement against capitalism. Sidney Hillman, one of the founders of the CIO, who had once advocated the building of a labor party, stated bluntly in the early 1940s: “It is definitely not the policy of the CIO to organize a third party, but rather to abstain from and

discourage any move in that direction. Any such move would serve to divide labor and the progressive forces,” i.e., the liberal Democrats.

As Trotsky had predicted, the failure of the trade union movement to take an independent political course led to its degeneration and ultimately its abandonment of the most basic interests of the working class. One observant commentator on this period, author Alan Brinkley, said in his 1995 book, *The End of Reform*, that the trade unions’ alliance with the Democratic Party and rejection of a labor party meant that organized workers lost “the chance of becoming an independent political movement” and “forsook the struggle to win a significant redistribution of wealth and power within the industrial economy—the chance to create a genuine industrial democracy.” Before World War II, Brinkley commented, “the labor movement had included a substantial faction of militant, crusading workers promoting advanced, often radical, approaches to economic reform. By 1945, the movement was on its way to assuming its modern form as a highly bureaucratized (and occasionally corrupt) interest group, with relatively narrow (and at times illiberal) aims, committed mainly to its own institutional survival.”

Even as the American unions degenerated in the postwar period, the labor party demand retained its validity and continued for many years to be a powerful weapon in the arsenal of the Trotskyist movement. In the militant struggles against wage-cutting and union-busting, from the 1977-78 coal miners’ strike, to the smashing of the 1981 PATCO air traffic controllers’ strike, to the bitter battles of the 1980s, the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, called for a labor party based on socialist policies. This campaign provided the working class with a way forward to fight the attacks of the big business parties on its living conditions and democratic rights. At the same time, it enabled the most advanced workers to wage a struggle for the political independence of the working class against the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, which by the end of the 1980s had fully integrated itself into the structure of corporate management.

Jerry Isaacs, WSWS editorial board



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