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LABOR PARTY DISCUSSION

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 Price 5 cents

OUTLINE OF PROPOSAL FOR A LABOR PARTY CAMPAIGN

By James P. Cannon

We must make an important political turn without delay. It is time to start an aggressive campaign for the formation of an independent labor party, to transform the propaganda slogan into a slogan of agitation. This is the most important conclusion we must draw from the ~~recent elections in the light of~~ the present situation in the labor movement and the attitude of the workers and the changes which are sure to come in the not distant future. The labor party is the central issue around which the drive of the workers for class independence can be best expressed in the next period. By becoming the active champion of the labor party the SWP will link itself to an instinctive class movement which is almost certain to have a tumultuous growth, and thus multiply its influence and recruiting power. A brief review of our experiences with the labor party slogan since its adoption in 1938 up to the recent elections will show that now is the time to strike.

I

The adoption of the labor party slogan in 1938 was predicated on the stormy development of the elemental mass movement of the workers through the CIO and the assumption that this movement, in the next stage of its development, must seek a political expression. The enormous disproportion between the rate of growth of this mass movement of millions, and that of the vanguard party, showed that we could no longer hope for our party to be the medium for the first expression of political independent action by the mass of the workers.

We concluded that this first expression would take the form of an independent labor party based on the trade unions. Hence, in order for us to link ourselves with the next stages of the political development of the American workers, we had to adapt ourselves to the trend toward a labor party; to work within it in order to influence its development in a revolutionary direction and, at the same time, build the Trotskyist party. Our estimation of the most probable next stages of development, and our reasoning as to the role our party would be obliged to play by the circumstances, were correct. The development was slower than we anticipated at that time. But if we examine the causes which slowed down the labor party development, it will be clear that the movement was only arrested, dammed up, so to speak, in order to break out with still greater strength after some delay. The causes for the delay were transitory and are already passing away. The basic factors which make a great development of the labor party movement virtually certain, remain and have grown stronger.

II

Just about the time that we adopted our labor party position, the economic conjuncture began to improve. This checked the discontent of the workers which had been rising up till that time. Roosevelt still appeared to the workers as their champion and his social reform program was taken as a substitute for an independent political movement of the

workers. At the same time, the entire leadership of the CIO, including the Stalinists, who had been the most aggressive proponents of the labor party idea, supported Roosevelt in a body. They squelched all organized expressions of the sentiment for an independent labor party. The labor party question was thus taken off the agenda of trade union meetings and conventions, and to superficial reasoners the movement seemed to be killed. The campaign of agitation for a labor party which we had planned did not find a favorable field in these circumstances. Foreseeing future developments, we did not abandon the slogan, but in our practical work we had to change it from a slogan of agitation to a slogan of propaganda.

III

War conditions -- the huge preparatory development of the armaments industry and later the actual entry into the war -- introduced two factors which served to militate against any immediate response to the labor party slogan. The preliminary war prosperity tended to dampen the interest of the workers in the labor party for the time being. They still regarded Roosevelt as their political champion and supplemented their support of him by economic action against individual employers and corporations.

Then began the process of blocking off this economic outlet of the workers' struggle. By a combination of cajolery, threats and treachery -- granting of some wage increases, institution of the War Labor Board, labor leaders' pledges of no strikes -- the workers have been stymied on the economic field. Once this was accomplished, wages were virtually frozen, while the cost of living rises at a scale which amounts, in essence, to a monthly wage cut. Meanwhile, the employers, taking advantage of the situation, resist the settlement of virtually all grievances. These grievances pile up in the pigeon-holes of the War Labor Board and the workers get no satisfaction.

The workers' discontent is already evident and is bound to grow enormously as the cost of living mounts, as taxes and other burdens are piled upon them and they are denied corresponding wage increases, and they feel balked by the denial of the right to resort to the strike weapon. The entire history of the American labor movement shows that the workers tend to resort to independent political action when they find themselves defeated or frustrated on the economic field. There is every reason to believe that this tradition will assert itself more powerfully than ever in the coming period.

IV

To a certain extent -- positively, and especially negatively -- the workers asserted a tendency to resort to independent political action already in the recent Congressional and State elections. For the first time the Gallup poll was badly upset and the calculations of all the political experts were refuted by a factor which had not been anticipated -- the unprecedented absenteeism from voting by the workers. The smallness of the workers' vote can be attributed, in part, to the military mobilization, the shifting of vast numbers of workers to new locations, their failure to register, etc. But a very important factor.

if not the main factor, in the mass failure of the industrial workers to vote, was their attitude of indifference and cynicism toward the two capitalist parties.

On the other hand, in New York, where the leaders of the American Labor Party found themselves, much against their own desires, conducting an independent campaign, the workers turned out in great numbers to support the A.L.P. In New York City the A.L.P. polled 18% of the vote, despite the fact that it had an unknown nonentity from Tammany Hall as a candidate, and despite the appeals of Roosevelt-- and of Hillman, his chief labor lieutenant -- for the Democratic ticket. The vote of more than four hundred thousand for the A.L.P. in New York is a rather convincing demonstration of the deep sentiment of a considerable mass of workers in New York for independent political action.

In the Minnesota election somewhat the same phenomenon is to be observed. Despite the terrible disintegration of the upper circles of the Farmer-Labor Party there, the treachery of the Stalinists, the support of Stassen by the official heads of the CIO and considerable sections of the AFL bureaucracy -- despite all this, the Farmer-Labor Party polled a bigger percentage of the vote this year than was the case in 1940 or 1938.

From these two examples, we must conclude that a strong sentiment for independent political action by the workers reveals itself wherever they have a chance to express it through the medium of an independent party.

In the light of the election results in New York, the correctness of the position taken by our party in support of the A.L.P. ticket, and the absurdity of the boycott policy of the Workers Party juveniles, are equally demonstrated. The Workers Party decided to boycott the A.L.P. ticket just at the moment when it was demonstrating its greatest appeal to the workers under the most unfavorable conditions. We, on the other hand, by our policy, linked ourselves to the movement of the future. The lesson of this experience will not fail to impress itself on the minds of the class-conscious workers who are observing developments.

V

We should draw the following conclusions:

(1) The elections in New York and Minnesota positively, and in the other states, negatively, show the beginning of a trend of workers' sentiment for independent political action.

(2) The mass sentiment of the workers in this direction must grow tumultuously, as the gap widens between frozen wages on the one side and rising prices, tax burdens and enforced contributions on the other.

(3) The sentiment for independent political action may, and to a considerable extent will, take a very radical turn. To many

workers, burning with indignation over grievances which cannot find an outlet for expression on the economic field, the demand for a labor party will signify in a general way the demand for a workers' government -- for a change in the regime!

(4) The time is opportune right now for the SWP to start an aggressive campaign of agitation for an independent labor party. It would be a great political error to lose any time in establishing our position in the forefront of this movement.

VI

Our campaign should be developed according to a carefully worked out practical program, designed to swing the entire party into activity and to mobilize its energies for the advancement of the campaign, step by step, in coordination with the tempo of the mass movement itself. The main points of such a practical program are approximately as follows:

(1) Make the Labor Party the central campaign issue of the party in the next period.

(2) Stage a formal launching of the campaign by means of a Plenum, an Eastern Conference, or a New York membership meeting at which a thoroughly worked-out motivating speech will be delivered and published as the opening gun in the campaign. The emanation of this published speech from some kind of a formal party gathering will give it more weight than a mere article or statement.

(3) Our literary forces will have to be organized to prepare an abundance of propaganda material on the labor party question -- factual, historical, argumentative and perspective. The propaganda material should include a comprehensive pamphlet and leaflets, as well as abundant material in the press. Our comrades in the trade unions must be adequately supplied with information and arguments to meet all opposition on the labor party question.

(4) The campaign should be directed from the center in an organizational, as well as in a political way, following the developments of the work of each branch and giving systematic directions for next steps, and so forth.

(5) At a given stage in the development of the campaign, we should go over to the formation of labor party clubs in the unions where circumstances make this feasible, and use these clubs as the center of organization for the labor party fight. These labor party clubs will tend to become, in effect, left-wing caucuses or progressive groups. At the right time, regulating the tempo of our campaign always in accordance with the internal situation in each particular union, we should begin to introduce labor party resolutions. If we can succeed at first in having a labor party resolution passed by a prominent and influential trade union local or body, we can then use this resolution as the model for other unions. From a practical standpoint there is a big advantage in being able to say to a local

union that the proposed resolution is the one previously adopted by such and such a trade union organization on the labor party question. Our trade union department, in cooperation with the fractions, can work out this end of the matter without difficulty.

(6) We must proceed according to the conviction that all developments in the trade union movement from now on must work in favor of the development of the labor party sentiment; that the slogan will become increasingly popular; and that we must become the leaders of the fight. Our labor party campaign can be the medium through which we bring the elementary ideas of class independence into the trade union movement. This is the indicated approach for the gradual introduction of our entire transitional program.

VIII

Our labor party campaign must be understood as having great implications for the building of our party. We must conceive of it as our third big political maneuver, the first being the fusion with the A.W.P., and the second, the entry into the S.P. This maneuver will be different from the others, but the differences will be all in our favor, and the prospects of gain for our party is vastly greater.

America wakes party

(1) This time we will undertake the maneuver with a much better internal situation in our own party. Each of the other maneuvers had to be undertaken at the cost of a fierce factional fight and split in our own ranks. This time, we can enter the campaign with completely unified cadres and without the slightest fear of any internal disturbances as a result of the step. On the contrary, the announcement of the campaign can be expected to call forth enthusiasm throughout the party and a unanimous response to the directions of the center.

(2) The quality of the recruits, on the whole, which we will gain from the labor party maneuver will be different -- in some respects superior, strange as it may seem -- from the recruits gained by the fusion with the A.W.P. and the entry into the S.P. To be sure, in each of the other two cases we were dealing with the prospect of recruiting politically more advanced people than we will gain directly from the trade unions in the labor party campaign. But in return, the recruits from the other two ventures were in large measure centrists who brought with them the baggage of bad training and tradition and pre-conceived prejudices. That was why the attempt to assimilate them into the Trotskyist movement produced in each case a second factional fight and split. The heterogeneous composition of the Trotskyist cadre of those times also hampered this work of assimilation. The Abern clique based itself on the backward sections of the Musteites, and both Abern and Shachtman (not to mention Burnham!) based themselves on the unassimilated elements from the S.P. and the Yipsels.

From the labor party campaign we will get fresh workers whose political education will begin with us. They will come in as individuals without factional attachments from the past, and their assimilation and education will be facilitated by the united cadre of our present party which, in the meantime, has accumulated considerably more political experience.

The third important difference between the labor party campaign and the two previous political turns we have made is in the magnitude of the prospects. This time we must think in terms of thousands-- and eventually of tens of thousands -- of recruits who will come in to our party from the labor party movement. And, given the facts that they will come to us not as a previously constituted faction or party, but as individual recruits; that they will enter a party which is homogeneous in its composition, whose unified cadres have serious political experience behind them, we can confidently expect to assimilate the new members without an internal crisis.

There is no doubt that the key to the further development of our party in the next period and the expansion of its membership lies in the self-confidence, speed and energy with which we plunge into an organized labor party campaign. Big successes are possible for us along this line; even probable I would say. Naturally, we cannot promise ourselves any miracles over-night. There will be favorable returns from our campaign from the very start, but we must plan a long-time fight.

We can expect big results within a reasonable time. But even the first big results will only be a down payment on the unbounded prospects which lie ahead of us along this road. The modest campaign we are now inaugurating to recruit the second hundred members into the party since the Minneapolis trial should be conceived, in the light of a labor party campaign, as a mere curtain-raiser. We may hope to recruit thousands in the course of the labor party campaign, and our work from the start should be inspired by this confidence.

November 25, 1942

COMMENTS ON THE OUTLINE

Chicago, Ill.
December 3, 1942

This proposed turn on the Labor Party, in my opinion, is just what the doctor ordered. Our local experience in the trade unions confirm that unless the workers are offered a reasonable political answer to their mounting problems, something which can attract and mobilize them, there is going to be a terrific disintegration of the labor movement.

If the truth were known, most of the leading unions have suffered a tremendous decline in membership in the past few months. In the plants with which we are directly acquainted, not 25% of the workers are now in good standing. Apathy and disgust are wide-spread.

Moreover, the efforts of the workers to escape the squeeze being put on them are resulting in all kinds of weird proposals. The fantastic campaign in Buick for a seven-day work week, to augment declining purchasing power; all sorts of conflicts in Studebaker, Electro Motive and other big plants over the question of eight hour, ten hour or twelve hour shifts. A special article (which I may write shortly) is needed to give the bare outlines of the chaos in the plants, the crazy issues which arise, the confusion and disorganization in the unions, etc.

One point which might be dwelt on in a bit more detail in the Labor Party statement is this danger of demoralization and disintegration of the unions unless some positive political program is projected and undertaken. We have to consider seriously our own chances if this process of union decline continues. It is an absolute necessity for us to do all we can to keep the unions intact, not only as the best arena for our work and ideas, but also as positive protection for us.

We need such a campaign to prevent disorientation of our own people in the unions. Confronted with episodic developments and new secondary issues everyday in the plants, our people are constantly asking, "What concrete answers can we give the workers" on this and that. Of course, there are no "concrete answers"; if there were, we would not need to think much about socialism. A Labor Party campaign would serve to provide the general "concrete" answer for many of the problems for which our people have no positive and immediate solution. Moreover, such a campaign would give a central and unified character to all our trade union work nationally. This last, I consider of utmost importance.

This letter is hastily written, but I hope it conveys some ideas and thoughts with sufficient clarity to be of use to you.

Fraternally,

Joe Keller

Detroit, Michigan
December 4, 1942

I want to offer the following amendments to your Labor Party outline:

Delete all references to a "campaign." A campaign properly understood, envisages the accomplishment of a realizable objective within a reasonable period of time. That is not the way this question is posed. What we want to impress, instead, on the party is the fact that for the whole coming period the Labor Party will be "the central issue around which the drive of the workers for class independence can be best expressed." "We must plan a long time fight!"

All the general considerations you adduce in favor of the Labor Party are correct. The big movement for a Labor Party is sure to come and will arouse stormy passions inside the trade unions. But at this moment of writing, no appreciable movement of a positive and active character exists and our agitation will not arouse any positive and active response in the next weeks, because several important factors militate against any immediate response. (The fear and opposition of the whole top officialdom including the Stalinists; war prosperity -- another 8-9 months will elapse before living conditions in the key war centers become appreciably worse than in 1935-39; war patriotism -- real war weariness has not yet begun.)

Now we want to organize a thoroughgoing, concentrated propaganda and agitation, so that the party will gain through its experiences the "realization of unbounded prospects which lie ahead of us along this road." Later on, when we see the beginnings of a response in a positive manner to our agitation, we will launch a "full dress campaign", not only of agitation but of action.

In lieu of the first two sentences of the outline, I would say: "We propose that the party begin a thorough-going, intensive and concentrated propaganda and agitation for the formation of an independent Labor Party." I would also elaborate a bit more on the arguments of the very last three paragraphs of the outline along the lines of the above.

Add the following to the end of section III: "It is of course possible and even inevitable that there will be large scale outbursts on the economic field. But the top officialdom of the unions will unite with the Roosevelt war government in an attempt to smash these strike actions. The increasing bitterness, bafflement and feeling of frustration on the part of the workers will serve as a further impetus and will further help clear the road for independent political action."

Make two points of point 5, section 6. Separate the trade union part from the Labor Party clubs. In many cases it is possible to introduce Labor Party resolutions into the trade unions right now. The Labor Party clubs is something that we will organize later on. Change the first clause "at a given stage" to "a later stage."

Introduce new point after point No. 4 as follows: "The party shall direct a planned agitation in the form of special leaflets, popular pamphlets, etc. towards the best sections of the ALP membership, pointing out the lessons of the recent elections, calling on the ALP to decisively break with the Democratic party, adopt a constructive and militant program of labor action, return the control of the organization to the rank and file and take the initiative in calling a national conference for the purpose of launching an independent labor party on a national scale." (This may also be practical for Minnesota).

Yours,

E. R. Frank

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Detroit, Michigan
December 9, 1942

I am in agreement with your proposal for a labor party campaign.

I have one suggestion for an addition: namely, the role of the Negroes in the campaign and the conditions which have sharpened their thinking in the matter of a labor party, aside from the conditions developed in your proposal. I have in mind the effect of the recent anti-poll tax bill defeat, the continued discriminations, the emasculating of the FEPC, etc.

In a recent conversation with a Mr. Martin, Negro editor of the Michigan Chronicle (the paper was one of the few that gave full support to the MOW), we discussed the matter of the labor party. As a matter of fact he brought it up himself in the course of the conversation which dealt with the suppression of the Militant. He mentioned that just recently a group of influential Negroes (he did not specify which ones) tried to start an independent Negro political movement and were in touch with Crosswaith. How serious the move was I can't judge from the one meeting with him. However, it does indicate some of the thinking going on among the Negro intellectuals, which cannot help but be an indication of the thinking among the Negro workers.

Your proposal as it now stands, in my opinion, and without alterations and even additions, is sufficiently concise and inclusive for all essential purposes for directing the labor party campaign.

Fraternally,

A. Jones

Minneapolis, Minnesota
December 11, 1942

Your proposal for a labor party orientation, definitely now to agitate for it, has been read and discussed by Adams, Riley, McGee and myself and we wish to record our votes for the project.

I am writing to record our affirmative votes and each one will, according to his own opinion, make comments that he may wish to in addition to the formality of the votes. It seems to me that it is a very timely and well thought-out proposal. There can be little doubt when one reviews the experience of the recent election, and at the same time is aware of the limits that attend any trade union activity, that great sections of the workers are developing a mood that assures us a sympathetic reception for the labor party proposal.

The attitude of the workers of Minnesota in the recent elections, as indicated by the registration of their votes, or in certain sections, by the lack of registration, gives some evidence that supports the contentions made in the draft proposal that you submitted.

Farmer-Labor candidates averaged 24.3% of the total 1940 vote and 25.2% of the 1942 total. It is scarcely correct to average all of the FLP candidates together, however, because they did not make a unified campaign. Hjalmer Petersen running as a FLP candidate against Stassen received 37% of the total vote cast this year, a distinct increase over his 1940 vote. This was despite the fact that Stassen had the support of the official state CIO machine, big sections of the AFL officialdom, as well as the behind-the-scenes support of the Communist Party and of the Farmer-Labor Association itself. Hjalmer Petersen received this impressive vote despite a slump of nearly half a million votes from 1940's total, despite the fact that he did not carry on any kind of a campaign to appeal to the workers and farmers of the state.

Fraternally,

V. R. Dunne

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Chicago, Illinois
December 30, 1942

I have read carefully the proposal for a Labor Party campaign. With everything written in this outline I whole-heartedly agree; however, a vital practical matter was not covered, and I feel that a thorough discussion is necessary before the campaign is opened.

Assuming that the situation in any given circumstance is favorable for the launching of a Labor Party, the comrades involved would

be faced with the question of leadership in such a movement. While many workers would be quick to support a Labor Party, not so many would be quick to carry the burden of work which goes with organizing it. Moreover, because of our relative smallness in numbers we could at best share the leadership with others. The result is an organization dominated either by workers not yet fully aware of the need for a complete break with the two capitalist parties; or by Stalinists and political stooges whose aim would be to sabotage the movement, particularly at election time.

Let me give an example. Several years ago a group of steel workers called a local meeting for the purpose of reviving the then defunct Labor's Non-Partisan League. The opportunity was good for us. A comrade took the floor and convinced those present that instead of reviving the discredited League a Labor Party should be organized. The response was enthusiastic, and the movement was launched.

A regional meeting was called shortly thereafter at which the three leading labor federations were represented. A board of four directors was elected along with a program committee of five. On the board were two Stalinists, one political stooge, and the League's state chairman. On the program committee were two Stalinists, one political stooge, an innocent trade unionist, and our hard working comrade.

The meeting was advertised in the press; the politicians were getting nervous. Needless to say, the Board of Directors never met. The program committee, under pressure from our comrade, met several times but accomplished nothing.

By the time the primaries came around we found the Board members participating in campaign rallies of the two capitalist parties. The movement died and to this day no worker has so much as asked what became of it.

No doubt, our tactics were very poor; however, what worked against us more than anything was our own smallness. The scope of the Labor Party was so broad that we were overwhelmed not only by oppositional elements, but also by willing workers who had in their hands a weapon which they knew not how to use.

I am inclined to believe that at present a similar situation will develop from our efforts, unless we do the only thing that can prevent it; namely, take the leadership into our own hands. Can we do such a thing now? Out of political considerations I feel that we cannot. Even the capitalist parties recognize the present war as the main issue in any political campaign. The Labor Party must first of all give a clear cut stand on the war. Obviously, its position will be support for the war, perhaps with many buts and ifs, but support nevertheless. For the position of support we cannot accept responsibility; consequently, the question of taking the leadership is ruled out

We can leave the leadership for others, but then we may see our work undone before our very eyes by a combination of political inexperience and sabotage. On the other hand, it is difficult for an active comrade to advocate a Labor Party, work for it, and be its staunchest defender while at the same time turning away from active leadership of it. He faces the possibility of suffering considerable embarrassment for his actions, or of seeing his project taken light-mindedly by the workers. Where a Labor Party is already in existence this problem does not arise; but where the task is that of creating one, we are obliged to take the reins ourselves and see our work through to the end.

I am very enthusiastic over your proposal, for somehow I feel that it can be carried out successfully. I hope that you can call forth valuable experiences of others which might clear my mind of the problems expressed in this letter. I am burning with eagerness to get started, but I must have these points cleared before I can feel sure that we tread on safe ground.

Fraternally,

Mills

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St. Paul, Minnesota
February 27, 1943

The campaign for a Labor Party which our party is now launching can be of especial value in approaching the Negro workers. Some recent experiences in Minnesota in the Farmer-Labor movement may help to illustrate the value of such Labor Party propaganda among Negro workers.

The Farmer-Labor Association of Minnesota, a once powerful organization to which practically all of the trade unions, farm cooperatives, Farmers' Union and other working class organizations of the state were affiliated, has been so discredited by the six-year control of the Stalinists that only a handful of Stalinist-controlled CIO unions are still affiliated. Recently the Ramsey County section, to which a number of the St. Paul AFL unions were affiliated, voted to break with the Association; in Hennepin County most of the AFL unions left in disgust three or four years ago. The Stalinists reorganized the Ramsey County Association under the slogan of "unity" and succeeded in inducing two militant Negro trade union leaders, an official of the Dining Car Employees Union, and another official of the Sleeping Car Porters Union, to accept posts on the new Ramsey Farmer-Labor Association executive board.

These Negro militants are not Stalinists nor can they be considered Stalinist sympathizers. They have many times contributed to

the work of the CRDC and of the party. Moreover, they have publicly indicated their support of some of our people in the NAACP. But they are so disgusted with the reactionary Republican Governor Stassen and the equally reactionary national Democratic administration that they will grasp at any straw in order to participate in labor party politics.

These two Negro militants are no exceptions. There are thousands of other Negroes in the Twin Cities who consistently vote Farmer-Labor despite the terrible splits in the Farmer-Labor movement and the weak, pro-Roosevelt character of the Farmer-Labor election platforms of the past couple of years. The vote for Farmer-Labor candidates is always heavy in the Negro wards of St. Paul and Minneapolis. It has always been gratifying to the Minnesota Party to note that when we ran candidates we likewise received good votes in the Negro neighborhoods.

Negro workers today feel the need for political expression. The day of the solid Republican bloc of votes from Negro areas is gone forever. Roosevelt's hold on the Negro people -- a hold which he obtained when the WPA and a few other government agencies gave thousands of Negro workers their first or their best paid jobs in 1934-35-36 -- is being broken by the continued and intensified Jim Crowism of the Federal government in the armed forces and in defense industries.

Even such a conservative Negro leader as Walter White, the Executive Secretary of the NAACP, said recently "when the country awakes to the menace of the southern Democratic-reactionary Republican bloc there will be a revolt against those who today are trying to set back the clock." Other Negro leaders, Negro writers and the Negro press in general have expressed themselves in like manner.

Our party wants to win over the advanced Negro workers to the revolutionary movement just as we seek to win advanced white workers, but the vast majority of white and Negro workers are not yet ready for the revolutionary party. The Negro workers in far greater numbers than white workers are disgusted with the two old capitalist parties. To them, the slogan for independent working class political action will be even more attractive than it will be to large numbers of white workers. We see here the operation of the law of combined development. Negro workers have come into the trade union movement in large numbers only in the last ten years, but they have very quickly assimilated the lessons of trade union organization. Negro trade unionists have not had to unlearn the false Gompers teaching of "rewarding your friends and punishing your enemies" in the political field -- a teaching by which white trade unionists have been misled.

The new Negro worker, who has come through strike struggles and has learned confidence in himself and his trade union organization is impatient with the continued burden of Jim Crow. He is anxiously seeking the weapon by which he can destroy the hated discrimination

system. He has noted the absence of sincere proposals to wipe out discrimination in both the Republican and Democratic platforms. Already aroused by the successes which he has achieved on the economic field by organized effort, the Negro worker will quickly come to appreciate the necessity for taking the next step to independent working class political action through the Labor Party.

. . . Grace Carlson

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(Political Committee Meeting
November 30, 1942)

REMARKS ON THE LABOR PARTY CAMPAIGN

By James P. Cannon

You all have the outline. I don't have much to add except that some of the points can be elaborated.

The first point, about changing the slogan from a propaganda slogan to a slogan of agitation, I think is an important one to understand. In our work, generally, we ought to distinguish between three types of slogans: slogans of propaganda, slogans of agitation, and slogans of action. A perfectly correct slogan can be either effective or ineffective according to how it fits the situation.

For example, the slogan of workers defense guards during the height of the fight with the Coughlinites, Silver Shirts, Nazi Bundists, etc., was a slogan of agitation, in some cases leading directly to action. But with the dying down of this fascistic movement, we have moderated the tempo with which we press the slogan of workers defense guards. The practical necessity for them is not clear to the workers. It is now a propaganda slogan. We don't conduct an active campaign because there is not enough response in the present situation. A little later, when reaction gets more aggressive, and the labor movement runs up against fascistic hooliganism again, we will have to renew our agitation for the guards.

Similarly, with the labor party. We have been talking about the labor party, but only in an educational way because the movement didn't seem to have any wind in its sails during the last year or two. In the next period things will be different. We draw this conclusion from two points of view. The fundamental point of view: the situation in which the workers find themselves -- with increasing pressure and difficulties upon them, and the fact that they are stymied on the economic field -- must push them into the direction of political expression through a labor party. We should anticipate this and begin to prepare our campaign so as to get full prominence in the movement. The second, subsidiary, point of view: the results of the elections, especially the negative demonstration, showing the indifference of the workers to the Republican and Democratic Parties, should be construed as the preliminary symptoms of a movement in the direction of an independent political expression.

Now is the time, in my opinion, for us to begin beating the drums for a labor party, with the confidence that we are going to get a response, if not right away, a little later. The more active we are right now, when no other tendency in the labor movement is agitating the question, the more we will gain.

Point 3 under section 5 is a very important point. When the workers begin to make a break from the capitalist parties toward a labor party, it is quite possible that they will not give it the reformistic connotation which has been associated in the past with the

labor party, but that it will symbolize to them, even if vaguely, a break with the whole regime and a move for a new one, a regime of workers' power. This idea was first mentioned by Warde when he came back from Detroit. The more I have thought about it, the more it impresses me as a very plausible deduction. Under present conditions the labor party idea can have far more revolutionary implications than in past periods when it was advanced as a reformistic measure.

There is no need at all for us to speak about a reformistic labor party. What we are advocating is an independent labor party, and we are proposing our own program, which is not reformist. In the past, the assumption has always been that a labor party would surely be a reformist manifestation. It may, in some instances, but in others it may have a more profound meaning in the minds of many workers who adopt the slogan. In England, for example, the slogan of "Labor to Power" has no doubt the same double meaning for many workers. For some it can mean a purely moderate demand that the reformist labor leaders take over the government as agents of the bourgeois regime. For others it can indicate a call to the workers to take power and change the whole system. Those things should be taken into account when we weigh the feasibility and effectiveness of the labor party slogan in the present situation.

It is very important that a resolution or other political document considered by the National Committee be clearly motivated; that it be completely objective and properly proportioned. That is, it shouldn't be an "agitational" document in any sense of the word. I have this conception about all documents concerning policy and line, and if my outline proposal appears to contain agitational material, I don't mean it in that sense at all. The outline is intended as an objective appraisal, from my point of view, of the situation and perspectives.

Comrade Henderson has reminded us of Trotsky's conception that the economic basis for a successful reformist labor party is undermined. That, of course, is the materialistic foundation for the idea which Warde expressed -- that the workers will take the move for a labor party, in a vague way at least, as having revolutionary implications.

I don't speak in the outline about existing labor parties, because our tactics in these cases can be easily decided. Naturally, we are not going to start a new labor party in New York or Minnesota. We work within them. But I should point out, however, that we haven't been working within the ALP. The clubs are scattered all over the five boroughs. The Stalinists are quite active in these clubs and so are the Social Democrats; but we have not gotten around to them yet. Where there are existing parties, we certainly must participate in them if our campaign is to have any serious meaning.

When I speak of labor party clubs in the outline, I don't mean them in the sense of these ALP clubs. These latter are Assembly District organizations required by law, the legal basis for the election machinery. The Labor Party clubs suggested in the document are groups formed in the unions to fight for the labor party. For example, in

the Buick local you would form the club for the object of propagating the idea of the labor party in the local. Such clubs will, in the nature of things, become the natural centers of left-wing organization. They will represent a direct challenge to the whole regime -- to the state administration, as well as the trade union bureaucracy -- without exceeding, in a formal sense, the legalistic bounds. I have the idea that these labor party clubs can become in the next period a tremendous mechanism for the building of the left-wing in the unions.

The question has been raised in the discussion whether there is a trend or the beginning of a trend, whether the election results are exaggerated in the outline. I tried to state it very carefully, that the elections should be taken as representing the beginning of a trend. I emphasized the negative manifestations -- that is, the abstention of the workers from voting throughout the rest of the country -- more strongly even than the positive vote for the labor party in New York and Minnesota. Obviously, it is not yet a very conscious movement for a labor party, but it is a half-break with the old parties, and that necessarily has its logic. This, together with the fact that we are all confident the next period must promote a politicalization of the workers, justifies us in asserting that there is the beginning of a trend toward a powerful labor party movement.

The ALP vote keeps coming up to plague those who have any reservations in this regard. The fact is that the ALP got 400,000 votes in New York, under the most unfavorable conditions. The leaders were scared of themselves; the candidate, a Tammany hack, had never been heard of before; the pressure of Roosevelt and of Hillman, who was, you may say, the co-founder of the party, swung the whole bureaucracy of the Amalgamated away from the ALP. In spite of all that, the ALP got 18% of the votes in New York City and over 10% of the votes in the state. That must signify something. I think it has to be taken as signifying in part that these workers -- those who voted the ALP ticket were mainly workers -- have something in mind different from the old idea of voting for the Democratic Party.

I don't think it would be correct to say these are votes against Roosevelt. I would venture to say that 90% of them are still pro-Roosevelt. But this vote shows that the workers, still largely for Roosevelt, are not for the Democratic Party. That is the important thing. They don't give a hoot for the Democratic Party. All the time they were led in behind Roosevelt, they weren't led in behind the Democratic Party. On the contrary, their hostility is perhaps greater today than before. I think if you look back at this period of the Roosevelt regime you will see that the Labors' Non-Partisan League, the ALP in New York, and other manifestations showed that even then, in order to dragoon the workers to support Roosevelt, they had to provide some kind of labor or pseudo-labor machinery for it. They couldn't just unfurl the banner and say, Vote for Roosevelt.

This election was the greatest test of all. The workers in New York -- 400,000 of them -- stood up independently for the first time. I can't read anything else into this ALP vote except a strengthening of the impulse of the workers to have a party of their own.

I come to a point here which has been discussed and which I am quite insistent upon; that I want to describe this proposed labor party campaign as a maneuver, comparing it to the two other big maneuvers we carried through; the fusion of the Trotskyist organization with the A.W.P. and the entry into the S.P. Of course, I don't mean to equate the labor party campaign with the fusion and the entry. It is not the same thing at all. But it is the same kind of thing. What do we mean by a maneuver? A tactical turning aside from a predetermined path which has been blocked off in order to accomplish the same objective, to reach the same goal. The thing in common between the proposed labor party campaign and the other two maneuvers in our history is that which is basic: the attempt to build a revolutionary party through another party.

Normally and logically when you organize a party and adopt a program and invite people to join it, that is the way you build up a party -- by recruiting people directly. We came up against the fact in 1934, however, that there was another group developing in the left-wing road. They didn't come over to us, so we had to go over to meet them. This fusion with the A.W.P. was a departure from the line of direct recruitment. Similarly was the entry into the S.P. It was a maneuver, a turning away from the path of building the party by direct recruitment, because a certain set of circumstances confronted us where the most eligible and logical candidates for Bolshevism refused to come into this party. We had to turn about and join them. In the same sense, the united front can be called a maneuver. In the early days of its existence the Comintern reached a certain stale-mate in its struggle against the Social Democracy. The majority remained in the Social Democratic ranks and didn't come over and join the Communist Party. Then the Comintern devised the medium of the united front as a means of promoting the class struggle but also as a means of approach to the Social Democratic workers. This was not a fusion or an entry, but a coming together for concrete actions for specific immediate aims, etc.

What are we trying to do here? It was not a historic law that we must have a labor party in this country, and that we have to become advocates of it and work within it. As a matter of fact, in the early days of our movement Trotsky refused to sanction the advocacy of the labor party. He said: It is not yet determined whether the workers will seek their first political expression through a revolutionary party or through a reformist party based on the unions, and we should advocate the revolutionary party based on individual membership. The socialist movement over most of Europe and the world was built up that way. It was only during the stormy development of the CIO, which began to show political manifestations, when it became pretty obvious that the rate of development of this new mass movement of the CIO was so much faster in tempo and greater in scope than the development of the Socialist Workers Party -- it was only then that the Old Man revised his conclusion.

The new movement of the masses was developing outside the SWP, on a vastly wider scale. This trend is even clearer now than it was in 1938 when Trotsky first recommended the labor party tactic. In

order for us not to be left on the side-lines, we have to go into the labor party movement without giving up our own independent organization. That is what is contemplated in this proposal here. We are going to try, once again, to build our party through another party. We will be inside of it for a long time, although not in the same technical and precise way as in the other two maneuvers. This time there will be no fusion, and no entry. We will maintain the independence of our party all the time. But in some places we can conceive of the S.W.P. being affiliated to the labor party; in other places our members, as individuals, will be members of both; in other places, where we may be denied entrance as a party, we will participate in the labor party through the unions, etc. But, in every variant, we will be trying to build a revolutionary party through a political movement of the masses which is not yet clearly defined as revolutionary, or reformist, or in between.

From an internal point of view, it is very important, in my opinion, to explain to the membership that we conceive this campaign as a maneuver. On the one hand, we must show them the great scope of its possibilities; on the other hand, that we are maintaining our independence all the time. And we are working, not to build the labor party as a substitute for our party, but to build our party as the party that must lead the revolution. The labor party may never come to full-fledged shape at all. The conflict of the two wings -- the revolutionary and the reformist -- can reach such a state of tension that the movement will split before the party is fully formed on a national scale. I can even conceive of the existence of two kinds of labor parties for a certain time -- a labor party with a revolutionary program and a labor party with a reformist program -- which would engage in election contests against each other.

In the past, under the pressure of circumstances, parties based on the unions have taken a far more radical turn than the ordinary reformist conceptions. The Norwegian labor party was almost a replica, in its structure, of the British Labor Party. But, following the war, it formally adopted the communist program and joined the Comintern. The Comintern tried to transform it from a loose party based on delegates from unions into an individual membership party. In the process, eventually, a split took place and the Norwegian Communist Party was carved out of the body of the Norwegian labor party. When the revolutionary tide receded and the mass of the workers returned to reformism, things fell back into their old place again. The developments of the labor party movement in the United States, with the stormy developments of the class struggle which are clearly indicated, will least of all follow a pre-determined pattern.

I think it is correct to characterize what is proposed here as a political turn. A campaign of agitation, as is proposed, requires a radical change in our activity and, to a certain extent, in our attitude. We have to stir the party from top to bottom with discussion on the labor party question and show the party members that they have now a chance to participate in a fight, in a movement. We should aim to inspire them with the perspectives of the big possibilities which are by no means stated in an exaggerated fashion. At the appropriate time our comrades will begin moving in the unions step by step; perhaps to form a labor party club, perhaps to introduce a

resolution, perhaps to circularize this resolution to other places, according to circumstances in each case. All this represents a turn from what we have been doing up to now in our purely routine propaganda in the press without pressing or pushing the issues in the unions.

If we had been imbued with this conception a few months ago we would have taken a different attitude in the New York election. We would have been campaigning for the labor party in New York from the very beginning if we had been as sure then of what was going on as we are now. I personally couldn't support such an idea then because I didn't know; I needed the results of the election to convince me that the ALP was not going to fall apart. It is clear now that we had a rather timid evaluation of its vitality.

Comrade Charles has pointed out that the trend of the war, the Allied victories, promoting reaction on the one side, will also provoke more resentment and discontent, and perhaps revolt, in one form or another, by the workers. The assumption is that, in general, there will be a sharpening of the class struggle. How can this manifest itself in the next period? Possibly there will be a wave of outlaw strikes. But I think its strongest manifestation will be in the political field. The two may go together. But, in any case, we should absolutely count on a sharpening of the class struggle and help to give it a political expression.

We must appraise correctly the workers' attitude toward Roosevelt. I believe, also, that the abstention of the workers from the elections in the big industrial centers, did not signify a break with Roosevelt. It showed that they want to make a distinction between Roosevelt's social reforms and the Democratic Party's war program. Their tendency is to support the war under the leadership of Roosevelt, in payment for the social reforms they think they got from him. The thing they consider most is the social reform program. From their standpoint, at the present time, the ideal political situation would be a labor party with Roosevelt at the head of it. Their sentiment is for a labor political expression, but they haven't broken with Roosevelt. We have to be very careful that we don't over-estimate that question or conclude that the elections showed a break with Roosevelt.

The "New Deal" of Roosevelt was a substitute for the social reform program of Social Democracy in the past. That was the basis of its hold on the workers. The bankruptcy of the New Deal can't possibly, in my opinion, push the workers back into an acceptance of traditional capitalist party politics. Their next turn will be toward a labor party.

Once more about kinds of slogans: We must carefully explain to the party the difference between a propaganda slogan and agitational slogan, and an agitational slogan and a slogan of action. I am especially sensitive on this because, in the early days of the C.P., in those furious debates we used to have on the labor party, we fell into all kinds of mistakes on the question. In a situation such as

there has been in the past few years, the labor party could only be a propaganda slogan. If we had been beating the drums all over the labor movement and tried to form labor party clubs, we would have simply broken our heads. The time was not ripe, there was not enough response, to justify intense agitation for the labor party. It was necessary to confine it to a propaganda slogan. But now there are possibilities, and even probabilities, of a rising sentiment of the workers and a favorable response to a concentrated agitation for the labor party. In the new situation we would make the greatest error if we were to lag behind events and continue with the routine propaganda of the past.

There is a difference also between slogans of agitation and slogans of action. This is illustrated by one of the classic errors of the early communist movement in the United States. Propaganda for the idea of Workers Soviets is, now as always, a principle of the program. But in 1919 the editors of the New York "Communist", growing impatient, issued the slogan of action in a banner headline: "Organize Workers' Councils." Sad to say, the Soviets did not materialize. The slogan of action was premature and discredited its authors.

It wouldn't be out of order, in connection with the educational preparation of the party for this campaign, if we impart to the whole membership a better understanding of the different ways of applying slogans -- as slogans of propaganda, of agitation, or of action -- according to the situation, as it is in reality.

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It is the first step in political education. We can say that this first step was due five or ten years ago. Yes, theoretically that is so, but insofar as the workers were more or less satisfied by the trade union machinery, and even lived without this machinery, the propaganda in favor of a working class party was more or less theoretical, abstract and coincided with the propaganda of certain centrist and communist groups and so on. Now the situation has changed. It is an objective fact in the sense that the new trade unions created by the workers came to an impasse -- a blind alley -- and the only way for workers already organized in trade unions is to join their forces in order to influence legislation, to influence the class struggle. The working class stands before an alternative. Either the trade unions will be dissolved or they will join for political action. That is the objective situation, not created by us, and in this sense the agitation for a working class party becomes now not an abstract but a totally concrete step in progress for the workers organized in the trade unions in the first instance and for those not organized at all. In the second place it is an absolutely concrete task determined by economic and social conditions. It would be absurd for us to say that because the new party issues from the political amalgamation of the trade unions it will of necessity be opportunistic. We will not invite the workers to make this same step in the same way as abroad. Of course if we had any real choice between a reformist party or a revolutionary party, we would say this is your address (meaning the revolutionary party). But a party is absolutely necessary. It is the only road for us in this situation. To say that we will fight against opportunism, as of course we will fight today and tomorrow, especially if the working class party had been organized, by blocking a progressive step which can produce opportunism, is a very reactionary policy, and sectarianism is often reactionary because it opposes the necessary action of the working class. . . .

I believe that the most fighting elements in the trade unions should be our youth, who should not oppose our movement to the labor party but go inside the labor party, even a very opportunist labor party. They must be inside. That is their duty. That our young comrades separate the transitional program from the labor party is understandable because the transitional program is an international question, but for the United States they are connected -- both questions -- and I believe that some of our young comrades accept the transitional program without good understanding of its meaning, for otherwise the formal separation of it would lose for them all importance.

Mexico City

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