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Los Angeles, California  
March 10, 1975

Barry Sheppard  
New York, N.Y.

Dear Barry,

I am writing you because Jack told me you would make the report at the plenum on the current conjuncture. I will not be there but would like my views to be known to you. This letter should be looked upon as an extension of my letter to Jack of Jan. 21 which you have. You may show this to anyone you think should see it.

The most important thing that is new in this period is that the economic crisis, which began as long ago as 1971, has changed the psychology of the workers. I believe this change has been extensive.

The workers, as an organized force, participated very little in the movements that arose during the 1960s. They were confident that their jobs were secure, more or less, and that their standard of living would be maintained and even improved.

Today that confidence has been eroded and in all likelihood has just about disappeared. The rapidly escalating layoffs have thrown a chill into the working class as a whole. All workers feel far less secure, if they feel secure at all, than they did five years ago.

The first actions of protest, demands for jobs, etc., have already been seen. These have been inadequate, hesitating and limited by the conservative labor bureaucracy. However, the union leaders have in some cases threatened larger actions if something isn't done.

In discussing changes among the workers (that I think make it necessary for us to shift to some extent to planned propaganda work at factories and unions) with a few comrades here I have received the astonishing reply that the work we have done and are doing in Boston is a substitute for my proposal. While I am in agreement on the party's work in Boston and its importance, I think this is entirely different from making propaganda on economic questions aimed at the working class as a whole. I don't see how one can be confused with the other. The struggle against racism has a validity of its own, as we have said many times in the past. If this struggle can be tied to others, and I think it can as I will explain later, so much the better. But if it cannot, then it must be pursued on its own merits.

But work among the class as a whole is something else again and in this period, when workers are no longer looking to the future with confidence, and when the most important questions on their minds are economic, this puts a different obligation upon the party.

One comrade blurted out to me that the struggle against racism in Boston was our answer to the current problems of the workers. He said, "We have to demand that the white workers support the program of the Blacks." I cannot think of a more unproductive way to approach the white workers in this country than that. We can demand this of the white workers from now to doomsday but it will yield no results as anyone can tell you who has worked in a factory and been around American workers, that is, white workers.

In 1933 Trotsky thought that 99.9% of the white workers were chauvinistic towards Blacks. (see "Young Socialist" Feb. 1975). This figure may have been too high. In any case things have improved somewhat in this respect since 1933. But if we want to see things in their real light, we will admit that the great majority of white workers remains prejudiced against Blacks even now. There is also a good deal of anti-semitism and prejudice against other minorities.

How to overcome this and effect a unity in action between the majority white workers, without whom a revolution cannot be made, and the minorities is a problem for us. However, here a lesson from the past can be useful. In the mid-1930s, when the CIO came upon the scene Black workers were for the first time welcomed into a large labor organization by white workers. Many of these whites were originally from the south and, as Cannon explained in his 1946 speech on the Theses on the American Revolution, were former members of the Klan.

The white workers who formed the CIO had to confront the problem posed to them of many Black workers already in the plants. I think they had to weigh their economic interests against their long-standing prejudice. In this confrontation in the minds of the white workers the economic interests won out over the racial prejudice.

This lesson should be relearned by the party and the example turned to good use in the current situation. Means of opposing the economic interests of the white workers against their remaining prejudices can be found and propaganda worked out around such questions. This kind of approach can yield some results; ultimatums issued to white workers will bring nothing at all.

If we want to learn all that is possible about the working class in this country, we have to say that the white workers make up a majority, even an overwhelming majority, of the class. To talk of revolutionary activity without this segment of the class is foolish; it just cannot bring anything. We have a program for the white workers, a program that applies to all workers no matter what their race or color. We should use this program more than we do.

For example, on page 24 of the March 7th Militant there is an article on oil. (I cite this article as a sample of many of its kind and mean no special criticism of the author). There is no programmatic demand made in the article, to nationalize the oil industry with workers control. Why not? I think our writers far too seldom use our program in their articles. They need to be

educated in how to do this. Bourgeois writers are discussing the idea of nationalizing the energy industry; letters to editors of daily papers raise the question, but our press pays little or no attention to this excellent demand.

To illustrate how little our party is oriented towards the workers, and I repeat that my proposal is only to organize propaganda campaigns among them and not to form left-wing factions in unions, as one comrade asked me, I am enclosing the branch letter sent to our members dated Feb. 17, 1975, a few weeks ago. I have underlined four sales during the week, all of them on campuses. This would be appropriate for the YSA but shouldn't the party try to sell to workers? I think it should and should start now, or else others will get there before us and this will produce more problems.

In politics time is of the essence. Cannon was fond of the expression, "Strike while the iron is hot." The party must be able to turn to the fields where opportunity is present. Right now, this is among the workers. It is necessary to make a turn and to explain it to the membership as a turn, if you agree to make it.

A final word on consciousness. It is of the greatest importance in educating the membership to introduce the greatest amount of understanding of what the party is doing in any particular period. The better the membership understands why the party's course is set in a certain direction, the better the tasks will be carried out, the better the program can be explained to others, the more recruits can be obtained.

Comradely,  
s/Milt Alvin