

DETROIT REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT RECORDS

BOX 15 OF 16

FOLDER 6

CLEVELAND DISSIDENT LABOR
NEWSPAPER MODERN TIMES

MODERN TIMES

The role of a labor paper--

Some history and political development

The group which originally started Modern Times had no intention of functioning primarily as a newspaper. We had too often heard of collectives bogging down in the production of a paper, only to dissolve the paper before it really had outlived its usefulness in order to do other kinds of organizing. Or perhaps worse, we didn't want our relationship to the class struggle to be that of reporting. We felt workplace organizing to be the most immediate necessity.

Being relatively new to the city (and to the job market), we had considerable difficulty in obtaining jobs in plants and hospitals, the kinds of jobs we wanted. Some of us were in training programs or vocational schools for a considerable period of time before we could find these jobs. We evaluated the idea of putting out a labor paper and rejected it several times, once because we found no interest among other people in the movement in working on it.

At this time we were meeting regularly and studying together, but felt frustrated by our isolation from people in the plants and other workplaces. Some of the women went down to Ohio Bell during their strike and talked with people, offering our support etc...but realized that although people were grateful for our interest, they couldn't quite understand our putting ourselves out like this (now that we have the paper, we have found the workers from the same building very friendly and interested).

We produced a leaflet about the mayoral elections which was only distributed the day of elections, but its point of view seemed well accepted among working class voters and we felt encouraged by those encounters. We later produced another leaflet tying the war in Vietnam to Nixon's new economic policy, encouraging people to attend an anti-war demonstration. The effect of these leaflets on Cleveland was negligible, but they provided a way for us to get out and talk with people.

So in this context the production and distribution of a class-conscious labor paper in Cleveland began to make more sense. We hoped that it would provide a vehicle for us to make contacts with people during strikes and city crises. We hoped to follow up on these contacts and develop working relationships where possible. We felt it would be useful to show to people at work so that they might understand that there was a group of people who shared these ideas, and not just the nut who was their friend. We hoped that by the consistent dissemination of information about working class activities and official political decisions which hurt working people, that

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we might aid in building class solidarity in this city. We also wanted to see how people would react to a paper that was not rhetorical and which tried to address a number of aspects of working class life--such as sports, car culture, television...

The politics of Modern Times developed as our contact with different struggles had to be analyzed. Our first issue had a long interview with a worker from the Lordstown Vega plant, which was about to strike. We felt sympathetic because of the demands and activities of that strike, which are well known. We did not find out enough about its progress and conclusion at the time to be critical of the UAW's role. But after it was over, we began to wonder what the settlement had been exactly (which was kept rather quiet) and how the rank and file felt about it.

Another strike involving the UAW taught us more. This was a strike at Gould Ocean Systems (a torpedo plant) in which the teamsters and the UAW cooperated with the police, the U.S. government navy, as well as management to destroy the workers' most powerful bargaining agent. (They allowed finished torpedoes to pass the picket line, telling the protesting rank and filers that they had to because it was a "government contract".)* The strikers had been joined by a number of anti-war people from the movement who were eager to help the strikers prevent the torpedoes from leaving Gould.

This revolting incident was then concluded by the presentation to the members of the union of another 3-year contract which was virtually indistinguishable from the one that preceded it. The UAW rammed it through using the male chauvinism of its membership. By producing a pay raise as the only real change, they convinced the women (who were paid considerably less than the men) to vote in the new contract because they needed the money. All the demands for better conditions, no compulsory overtime etc...were defeated instantly. The rage that was vented against the union in the local bar after the vote to accept that contract taught us alot about the split between union officials and the workers. Also about some concrete effects of male supremacy.

We reported such struggles as we were told them, and when workers felt sold out by their union, we said so. UAW officials who were running for office at a local Chevrolet plant where we distribute regularly attacked us verbally one night when we were there. In general, though, we haven't seen any examples of the rank and filers rising to defend the conduct of their union, so we have drawn some obvious conclusions.

Our changing position on unions is an example of how the production of a labor paper influenced our politics. We have to be flexible about the union stance, of course. In other words, we support the long and agonizing strikes of unorganized shops that are trying to win the right to unionize, but we do not present the union as any answer to their long-range problems either in conversation or in our articles.

The paper was not explicitly socialist at the outset. We were for workers' power and encouraging self-activity and examination of the system. We were also nervous about how it would be received. We felt uncomfortable about not using the word 'socialist' (a conflict between being 'up front politically' and wanting the labor paper to be effective). We eased into calling for an alternative to capitalism through articles on welfare, health and severe criticism of the democratic party. Modern Times is less cautious now about putting forth the notion of an alternative system, largely because of the positive response to our ideas.

We have not, however, called for a socialist revolution or "socialism" in the abstract, because it is a label that is too easily misunderstood. Faced with the reality of working class struggles, attitudes, and capacity for self-organization, we have had to seriously challenge our old notions of what socialism is or could be. We have been developing an idea of what socialism should be and prefer to share that with workers on a more consistent level (such as people we work with, meet with, are organizing with, study with, etc...).

Production

At first, it took all our time and energy outside work to simply write, lay out and distribute the paper. None of us had any experience in producing a newspaper. Out of necessity, we have cut down the number of meetings spent on the paper. Here is an outline of a month's schedule:

A prerequisite is that everyone in the group has been following up on local events and/or thinking of article topics throughout the preceding month. During the second half of a month we have a meeting where all the ideas for articles are presented along with a rationale of why they should be included. Usually some political discussion takes place so that the article will reflect the position of Modern Times and not the point of view of an individual. If the subject is too complex, we put it on the agenda for next week so we can think about it and talk about it for a week before finalizing a point of view. We did this with our articles on McGovern, busing for example, because there was confusion about how to best discuss them. Also, any articles about local strikes that are taking place at the moment have to be written at the last minute if possible, so the paper won't be obsolete when it hits the street. This is always a problem with monthlies.

The first week of the month is usually the deadline. The articles are read collectively and changed where needed. Last minute decisions and possibly assignments are made if something new has come up. Articles are sent to the printers to be typeset. Modern Times is fortunate to be working with an excellent

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group of movement printers in Oberlin called the New Media Workshop (IWW).

The next weekend we all go to the printers and lay out the paper. This usually takes us both days because of our inefficiency. We are beginning to realize that it doesn't take everyone in the group to lay out every paper, so we are now thinking about having a rotating committee so that it isn't such a burden on everyone every month. The people who are not laying out the paper that month can be participating in other things like setting up new study groups, attending their own union meetings, TURF meetings, etc...

Distribution is usually assigned during part of another meeting. We distribute the paper at shift changes at Chevrolet, Alcoa, Republic Steel, the Post Office, Ohio Bell, sometimes at the welfare office, and where there is a strike. We generally have very little feedback while distributing, but are sensitive to comments and attitudes directed our way. In general, people have a very open attitude and want to know what's going on. Especially if it's against the company. They rarely have time to stop and talk, since they're coming and going from work, and we have gotten few subscriptions from these places where we distribute regularly. We pass out the paper for free, partly because most people wouldn't stop long enough during shift change to get money out, and so that we won't get busted for selling without a license.

Our most successful distribution outlet has been through people we work with. A few of them take bundles of papers and give them out to friends and relatives, some of whom take bundles to distribute where they work. We also get the paper out at plants in Lorain, Ohio, through some people in Oberlin, and at some East Side plants through a labor faction in the Cleveland NAM chapter.

To sum up the problem of production and distribution, we would say that if the group is committed to the idea of working collectively, which we are, the time and energy expended on a regularly appearing paper is considerable. Of course, the more experienced you get, the more streamlined the process becomes. Many of us would prefer to withdraw more from the actual production of Modern Times, as we become more deeply involved in groups at the workplace and somewhat more involved with the Cleveland movement. Some of us have short-range projects in mind that might help to build the labor movement in Cleveland, but need open blocks of time in which to organize them. But none of us feel that there are enough people on the "staff" to enable this. As we develop a larger organization, the paper can become a part of our activity in Cleveland, rather than our major one.

Uses for the paper, effects, criticisms

One of the major things we thought might happen when we first started the paper, was that we might be able to develop ongoing relationships with workers who were turned on to it. We stressed going down to strikes as often as we possibly could, taking the paper with us and talking to people about their strike, their lives etc...and tried to have interviews or as many direct quotes as possible. This is something we have fallen down on in recent months, although it was very successful for two reasons. People like talking about themselves and their beliefs very much and a strike is one of the times when they have the time to do so. Also the credibility and interest of a paper is heightened when it is full of real stories and quotes.

The main reason we slowed down on this part of the process is that we have been trying to cut down on the time spent on the paper, but we feel that this is not the best way to do it. We should not rely on our own interpretations of events as we read about them in the bourgeois press or hear about them through the grapevine.

We were not particularly successful in building lasting contacts with the individual strikers who we had good discussions with. They tended to be suspicious of the press sometimes, or even just of outsiders, and often didn't want to exchange names etc.. This is understandable, but makes continuing contact virtually impossible. We still feel this is a goal, however, and will renew our efforts to use the paper as a means of introducing ourselves and some of our ideas to people on strike.

The paper has not been used on a mass scale on the job by us yet. We want to get a little seniority if possible so as not to get fired. We are very interested in building plant organizations which might produce their own papers, both where we work and in other places. A friend whom we met through TURF and who has distributed the paper among his co-workers is thinking about starting a newsletter where he works. These papers would hopefully be written and distributed by co-workers, not just one or two people. Our co-workers who have seen Modern Times take us and our ideas (and our commitment) more seriously when they see it come out each month from a whole group of people working together.

Our major objective as a paper and as a group is to help build an independent, class-conscious working class movement in Cleveland. We have been working isolated from the rest of the "movement" (anti-war, college-based, national organizations). Recently, however, we have noticed that people from these other groups seem eager to learn what we have to say, have asked us to participate, even to assume a certain amount of leadership in various projects. We think that this is due to the fact that our group has held together and managed to put out the paper consistently for nine months now, because we have a consistent set of politics which makes us open to a variety of activity rather than exclusive, and because many of them are awakening to the reality of the working class struggle.