

DETROIT REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT RECORDS

BOX 15 OF 16

FOLDER 18

POLITICAL CONDITIONS LOS
ANGELES AND PITTSBURGH

REPORT FROM PITTSBURGH OCTOBER 1972

Pittsburgh has as yet not formed an organization or group of people who share common ideals, objectives, and good working-class politics. Until recently, the Pgh group consisted of one very frustrated person. He had been in Pgh for a little over two years and decided about 1½ years ago to place the bulk of his energies into workplace organizing. He has been employed (until four days ago) in a six-person Teamster shop which greatly limited his contacts and knowledge of the situation in larger truck barns. Because of a great scarcity of jobs, he had previously been reluctant to leave that position. Though the job situation has not improved, he has resigned from that job to preserve his sanity. His inability to reach other workers cannot be blamed entirely on the job situation, though it remains an important factor. He has also had a very hard time coping with his seeming isolation (even though much of it may have been brought upon himself) and he has often been puzzled in finding ways to try and build a sense of class consciousness with other working people. He has often been reluctant to bring the subject of "class" into discussions for fear of becoming totally alienated from the other members of his local. The Teamster local that he is a member of has an extremely well organized and reactionary leadership and has generally been able to successfully hold off even minor reform.

Recently, this brother was joined by a woman who made a decision to stay in Pgh, accept a VISTA job and is presently working with the Welfare Rights Organization of Allegheny County. It is too early to determine whether this job will be worth the time that it takes, even though present indications are negative. Whether or not she remains with that job, it is likely that she will continue directing the bulk of her efforts towards community organizing.

In any case, we both feel that our chances of accomplishing something are now increased as neither one of us must now operate without support.

The Pgh situation in general is in somewhat a state of limbo. Twenty years ago, we would have advised anyone to go immediately to the steel mills if they were to organize for socialist revolution. Today, steel is rapidly dying due to obsolete and archaic machinery and mills, and the price of Japanese steel. Information that we have been able to gather indicates that big steel will have a role of decreasing importance in the years to come and may well be gone within twenty years. The plans of the rulers (documented by research and plans being compiled by the universities) are to remake Pgh into an area of light production industry, service-oriented industry, and research and development.

The "Left" in Pgh is virtually non-existent to the public eye. The New American Movement has not been able to make their presence known: the anti-war movement (except for an occasional rally) is dead or restricted to academics; and there is a group of 4 or 5 persons who call themselves Leninists and who are trying to initiate a community paper. Of course, the CP still exists and was quite visible for a while thru a rapidly growing YWLL. Recently, however, the YWLL has been heard of only in relation to electoral politics and we suspect that their membership and enthusiasm has somewhat lessened. All of these groups are predominantly White and we cannot report in depth (due to our limited contacts) on the existence or strength of Black groups on the Left.

LOS ANGELES WORK GROUP

The Los Angeles 60-mile circle has the second largest concentration of population and business in the United States, behind only the New York area. The Gross National Product of California would make the state about the sixth largest economy in the world. With less than 5% of the land area of the state, this area accounts for 50% of the State's total: population, employment, personal income, retail sales, wholesale trade, automobiles, telephones, construction, homebuilding, and exports. There are approximately 4 million employed workers, about one million of those in manufacturing.

Los Angeles is not dominated primarily by a single or even two or three main industries. Aerospace is the largest industry (with 8 companies employing 500,000 people with full employment) and also one that usually requires thorough security checks for employment. Following that, LA is a mixture of industries. Auto, rubber and steel form the core of its basic industry. There is a good sized paper and container industry (paper, cans, glass), a number of meatpacking plants, a large garment industry (70,000), a large trucking industry, and several oil companies. The area also ranks first in the entertainment industry. The Los Angeles-Long Beach harbor complex is the leading port of the Pacific Coast with respect to international trade as well as the leading fishing port in the country.

Industry is spread out with no major center, even though there are a number of industrial pockets. Except for the advanced-technology industries - scientific research and development, electronics, aerospace, scientific instruments, oceanography, etc. plants in LA are large if they have from 200-600 workers.

The working class here is very young, with very little sense of rootedness in the area. LA has one of the weakest labor histories of any major city, both in terms of numbers of workers unionized, strength and militancy of unions, self-activity of the working class, and so on. The LA ruling class is proud of its control and stifling of labor organization since the turn of the century.

The LA working class is one of the most richly mixed in the country. It has a large population of blacks (more than $\frac{1}{2}$ million), a much larger number of browns - - LA has the largest Spanish-speaking population on the continent outside of Mexico City. There is a large Asian community (mostly Japanese, some Chinese) and the largest concentration of native Americans in the U.S. (100,000 or one out of 10 Native Americans). Also a very large group of Southern working class whites who have migrated here since the 1930s. Race and class intermix in Los Angeles in a unique way, with potential advantages in terms of multi-national class organization. The disadvantage is that models developed elsewhere may be less applicable to LA.

COLLECTIVE

The three of us who are writing this statement used to belong to an LA-based collective of nine people (7 white, two Asian; 5 men and four women). The collective was formed in the spring of 1970 and dissolved in the fall of 1971. All of us had come out of the student movement and the political unity of the group in the beginning was fairly weak. We all agreed on the importance of the working class in making a socialist revolution and felt that the isolation of the student movement from the masses of working people was its greatest weakness. In the beginning we had a community locus and

wanted to develop some long range organizing. During the first few months we explored the idea of workplace organizing and decided we would like to do a combination of workplace and community organizing. We emphasized the workplace because we felt that would teach us the most. Our two major goals were proletarianizing our consciousness and making friends. After months of research on two major industrial areas we chose southeast LA, a predominately white-brown area residentially, but with many black workers in the plants. It had two totally industrial cities (140,000 workers by day, only 10,000 by night), surrounded by working class bedroom communities, some white, some black (Watts), some chicano (East LA) and some mixed.

At that time we were living in a lumpen-student-beach community on the west side of LA. Just as we were about to implement our new direction and move across town, we were hit with subpoenas to 3 collective members and 2 roomates to a federal grand jury in Tucson, Arizona. All refused to testify at first and spent from 3 to 6 months in jail. One had two children the collective took responsibility for. The disruption did not stop there. For 10 months after the jail time was over, we lived with the constant threat of people returning to jail. One person had 13 appearances set in Tucson and travelled there 9 times expecting to go back to jail. At different points it seemed that we all might be in jail with subpoenas or indictments. The resistance to this repression consumed an incredible amount of our energy. It created objective conditions which made unity very difficult -- no planning, almost no study, little ability to follow through and implement decisions or to sum up experiences, and geographical separation (at one period we had 1/3 of the collective in southeast LA, 1/3 in west LA -- 30 miles away - and 1/3 in Tucson. We resisted becoming a defense organization and moved ahead with our plans. We had 5 people working: 1 in the phone company, 1 in a lead foundry, 1 in the garnet industry, 1 in a liquid gas tank company, and 1 in a warehouse. A lot of factors made us unable to share that experience, draw lessons and strength from it and to use it to build from. Three of us participated in a study group with non-collective members. This was very important for those 3, but did not strengthen the whole group, where uneven development predominated.

What united us in our internal organization was a loose definition that the personal is political, or at least that they are closely linked. We looked at ourselves not only as motive forces of the revolution, but also as targets of it. As children of capitalism we felt that in organizing for the revolution, we must also revolutionize ourselves. We established collective living (in small units, not all together), collective finances and sharing of possessions. At various times, these structures/forms were what gave us strength and then later held us back. There was a lot of idealism in our approach. For example, we did not explore well our different racial and class backgrounds and thus never really understood the bases for our different approaches and tensions around things such as money, possessions, guilt, anger, conflict, families and so on. We have done a lot of rethinking of this and now have a much better understanding of how class differences and the failure to explore and understand them was essential to our failure.

If Tucson had not hit and almost devastated us when it did, and we had been able to all move and begin work and study together, we might have been able to successfully move through some of the class struggle that immobilized us. By the fall we were about where we originally wanted to be but the chickens came home to roost and the cumulative failures and disagreements of our past split us apart.

Since last fall a great deal of work has gone into summing up the exper-

ience of the collective. We have tried to pull lessons from our experience and not just leave it behind in a bitter lump. We are now editing a 50 page evaluation of our history and plan to have it ready to share with people by December. (We will send it on request. A 50¢ donation would help on printing cost, but we will send it even if you are broke). Far too often rich and beautiful experiences are lost because sisters and brothers do not take their struggles seriously enough to commit time to write about and share them. These experiences are the basis for the development of theory and practice for future revolutionary work.

PART WAY BETWEEN A TRIO AND A WORKER'S ORGANIZATION

Other than the year's thinking we have put into the evaluation, we have focus a lot of energy at the workplace, further proletarianizing our thinking and being. We have developed close friends in the area, sunk some roots for the protracted struggle, and gone through two contract negotiations, an industrial accident, several lay-offs, and a firing which brought about our first leaflet. The response to this leaflet was very good. It came towards the end of the grievance procedure just before arbitration. In it we justified breaking a plant window, attacked the company's attitude toward safety, talked a hard line on the union but left the shop-steward room to support us, and won the job back. This small victory brought almost the whole swing shift to our house for a victory party and has been a tremendous boost to developing relationships at the plant.

We feel that it is not the duty of conscious revolutionaries to take correct messages to workers, or to preach to them, but to share their fate and learn and teach in the process of struggle. In order to be able to develop trust and feeling in revolutionary organizations of working people, we have been trying to learn to be at home in many spheres of life and to develop a dialectical materialist approach that can explain people's problems to them. Being present wherever workers are present - plants, unions, industrial basketball leagues and bowling alleys, fixing cars and so on, you have to know what you should talk about and what solutions communism has to offer, not just to political economy, but also to day-to-day phenomenon of people's lives. The class struggle comes as a conflict of force, interests, values, priorities, ideas, life-styles, taking place ceaselessly in every area of life demanding the most constructive employment of skills as well as of force. The struggle at the point of production, while strategically the most crucial, is the expression of a more general struggle in the whole of a working person's life.

At present we are involved in helping put together a worker's discussion and study group of of 13 people all with current work place experience: a large steel plant, a lead foundry, a liquid gas tank plant, telephone company, two paper products' plants, General Motors Assembly Plant, Sears & Roebuck, a small print shop, a safe-making plant, a tool plant, a medium size carpet-manufacturer, and a vending machine distributor. The group formed about two months ago, so we are still in the process of structuring it. We are trying to find a form for sharing study and on-the-job practice. The emphasis is on applying our study to our practice, of shooting the arrow of Marxism-Leninism at the target of our concrete experience. So far we have been sharing our experiences from work, exchanging ideas about practical problems and issues that come up in working in plants, and talking about our class backgrounds and histories. We meet every two weeks and so far combining the personal (experience) and the political (theory) within this limited form has been our major difficulty. The ideological and organizational principles which could bring a working unity to the group have not yet been

defined. For example, the group has not defined itself as being explicitly Marxist. While the group has not addressed itself to the question of revolutionary organization for organizers, many in the group would like to see us involved in more joint practice as a group. Quite a few in the group have developed a Vietnam Slide Show for bringing work place contacts to see. The slides attempt to use the example of Vietnam to raise general questions about the State, the role of corporations and the military, the effect of the war on Vietnamese worker's and peasants and its effect on American workers' lives, and the nature democratic socialism in North Vietnam. Also we have begun work together around Proposition 22 - - a legal attempt by agribusiness to destroy the Farm Worker's Union and further organizing drives in the fields. We did a leaflet on it addressed to working people and have just begun to distribute it at plants and in the community. Theoretically the main question we have addressed so far is trade unionism using Aronowitz, Gramsci, Lenin and Foster as source material. We are struggling with many of the questions being talked about at this Conference: whether to work within trade unions, which ones, building rank and file caucuses and how to do it, building independent workplace (or workers') organizations, or doing both areas. If we try to build Independent Revolutionary Mass Organization, how do we proceed and what would it look like? Folks in non-union shops are also struggling with the question of organizational form at the workplace: what emphasis should be put on unionizing a shop, how should it be done, what are the laws governing labor-management relations? One of our greatest weaknesses has been our isolation from other groups. We have not thoroughly examined groups like the Revolutionary Union or the October League, but most of us seem to share many of the same criticisms of the existing groups we know of doing workplace organizing and addressing propaganda to the people as a whole.

We look forward to sharing our experiences and learning from people at the Conference. We hope some minimal network of communication at the very least can be developed and applaud those with the courage and stamina to call for and organize this gathering. Steve from the three of us and Toni from the Worker's Discussion and Study Group will be representing our group at the Conference.

Optimism of the Will

Pessimism of the Intelligence

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