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THEORY OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT—A REAPPRAISAL...

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Comment from an International Perspective

by
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The historical section of Professor Perlman's Theory of The Labor Movement—fully two-thirds of the book—is devoted to analysis of the Russian, German, British, and American labor movements, with some rich commentary on others; the remainder of the volume is devoted to the statement of his theory, based upon this comparative study. As one who has been engaged exclusively in the sphere of international labor during the last 5 years, I am convinced that Professor Perlman's Theory is an indispensable handbook on international labor. It is not only valid and pertinent for our day, as I shall point out shortly, but it provides, beyond comparison with any other work in the field, the most illuminating insights into the factors that shape and determine the character of labor movements.

Twenty-two years ago, Professor Perlman isolated three dominant factors which were then exerting a decisive influence on the nature of labor movements. The first concerned the capacity of capitalism "to survive as a ruling group and to withstand revolutionary attack." He defined capitalism, not in terms of the Marxian calculus of "exploiter" versus "exploited," but rather as, "a social organization presided over by a class with an 'effective will to power,' and a capacity to

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defend its power "through having convinced the other classes that they alone, the capitalists, know how to operate the complex economic apparatus of a modern society upon which the material welfare of all depends."

The second factor identified by Professor Perlman was the role of the "intellectual" both in the labor movements and in society at large. He defined the Intellectual as the "educated non-manualist who has established a contact with the labor movement either indirectly, through influence acquired over trade union bodies, or else as a leader of labor in his own right, as Lasalle was in Germany and as the leading Communists are in Russia today." These intellectuals, he classified as "ethical," "efficiency" and "determinist-revolutionary."

The third, and the "most vital factor in the labor situation [was] the trade union movement itself." The trade union movement was the genuine working-class movement, in which, in the words of Mr. Perlman, "given the opportunity to exist legally and to develop a leadership from its own ranks, the trade union mentality will eventually come to dominate"; a mentality which Mr. Perlman described as being oriented distinctively in "job-control," and motivating a particular kind of struggle both against the capitalist employer as well as against the doctrinaire intellectual.

My observations in the international labor scene lead me to the conclusion that the three factors outlined by Mr. Perlman are still very much the decisive influences in the character-formation of labor movements everywhere. Although the three factors have undergone some change since the Perlman Theory was published, I suggest that no understanding of

international labor is possible today without an assessment of capitalism's fighting power, the role of the doctrinaire intellectual and the outlook of the trade union movements. And even where special factors peculiar to individual countries have emerged, Mr. Perlman's historical analysis supplies a fruitful approach by example, because of its empirical sensitivity to such endemic influences as agrarian movements, the nature of land opportunity, the degree of democratic institutional developments—political and otherwise—the extent of market development, and a host of others. I would agree with Mr. Hardman that, "the union movement is the composite result of the sum total of forces operating in our multi-dimensional social system, and the theory of that movement that does not consider that compelling, fundamental circumstance is wrong." But if Mr. Hardman's remark implies a shortcoming of the Perlman Theory on that account, I fail to see its validity.

A deep depression, a second world war, and the threat of a third world war have altered the nature of capitalism in the last two decades. The significant change has come from the greatly expanded use of the State as an instrument in the national and international life of most communities. The pertinent question raised by this development is: Has it altered the ideology of trade unionism as described in the Perlman Theory? The British experience may suggest an answer to this question, in addition to the American experience on which other papers have commented.

The basic character of the British labor movement is to me illuminated by the following facts: The British labor government has not outlawed the

right to strike; it has not outlawed collective bargaining; it has not, despite nationalization of several industries, made industry subject to direct worker control; it has retreated even from its mild program of labor direction; it has become cautious through the lack of labor enthusiasm about further nationalization of industry; it has submitted to the recent TUC decision to abandon its policy of "wage restraint." The British labor government has, furthermore, shown no disposition to absorb the trade union movement and convert it into a state apparatus; and in the nationalized industries it has not erected the obstacle of "sovereignty" to prevent genuine collective bargaining. Now all of these facts are to me a clear indication that the labor government recognizes the trade union mentality of its workers, and that "socialism" is not the automatic result of labor's accession to political leadership. The British labor government is now experimenting with the device of selective nationalization in a community dominated by scarcity. How it solves the problem remains to be seen. But despite its extensive use of the state to modify capitalism, it finds that it must accept as a reality, the trade union mentality of its workers, with its concern for concrete liberty and concrete welfare on the job.

One area of conflict in Britain deserves mention: the conflict between the trade union sector and the doctrinaire sector of the labor party. In the good Fabian tradition, and with some flavor of Marxism, the intellectual is articulating some impatience with trade union "restrictionism." I do not think this conflict will necessarily be resolved in favor of the blueprinters. For example, Britain's recently launched productivity drive has disclosed that the British trade unions will be interested in increased productivity only in a context of

collective bargaining that permits protection of the worker in standard setting and concrete gains in wages. In this respect the British trade unions are reaffirming what American labor learned earlier under "efficiency capitalism." In fact, one British labor party figure of left-wing persuasion recently suggested, after analyzing the findings of a British trade union team studying productivity practices of American labor under ECA auspices, that U. S. labor was 50 years ahead of British labor in its methods of treating the issue of productivity.

In concluding this brief comment on trade unionism and the state, I would like to make some reference to the status of trade unionism in the so-called "underdeveloped countries," where the liberal-political revolutions against feudalism never really took root, and where an interesting type of "authoritarian" state appears to have emerged. It is an "authoritarian" state with a "humanitarian" facade erected in the form of a state-dominated labor movement that advertises "broad," "social" objectives. This, along with the communist phenomenon, compels me to make the following observation—in our "readings" of the labor movements around the world, there emerges a distinct correlation between "authoritarian" governments and so-called labor movements that advertise the "broad" and "social" objectives. The so-called "narrower" or "job-oriented" movements seem to correlate firmly with the free and the experimental community.

As for the role of the intellectual in labor movements, I wish time permitted a full account of what Professor Perlman has identified as the divergence of the trade union from the intellectual mentality, as in India, for example, where the "socialist" intelligentsia have been striving to awaken the working people, and where, despite this leadership, there is

already a distinctly manifested trade union mentality of the Perlman description among the working people. I will confine my comments, however, to the present communist intellectual, and then only to emphasize the trade union response to his activity over the world.

Communism is today fully "militarized." It has always been a "politics of warfare." But its militarization is consummated by an unprecedented command over sovereign national power. This full militarization of communism has not meant a surrender of the strategy of ideological conquest; rather, it seems to have greatly intensified its zeal to penetrate labor throughout the world. It has been in response to the world-wide effort of communism to capture labor, that the free trade union movements of the world, including the American labor movement in its entirety, have exposed their own deep-lying purposes, and have done so in a way that constitutes a significant validation of the Perlman Theory.

In December of 1949, 192 delegates from 43 countries, representing an estimated near-50 million workers, established in London the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. Many of these labor movements had previously wrenched away from the WFTU, which has now become the present day version of the "Third International." But the significance of the ICFTU was not only conscious separation from communism; it was equally, that for its principle of international labor solidarity, the ICFTU adopted fundamentally the philosophy of trade unionism. I say this because "socialist" objectives are not mentioned in either the Constitution or the Manifesto which states the aims and purposes of the new Federation. For those who have followed the history of international labor and its century-long tie-up with socialism, it is truly noteworthy that a world-wide

labor international movement, under the leadership of its mature labor organizations, feeling called upon to identify itself and to state its purpose in a world of ideological conflict, explicitly adopts the principle of free trade unionism as the basic and unifying objective for workers all over the world. This, to use a Perlman phrase, is "labor organicism" on a world-wide scale.

For students of American labor the advent of the ICFTU is of singular significance. For it is a matter of historical record that perhaps the most important moving spirit in the organization of the ICFTU, and in the adoption of its trade union principle, was the American labor movement; the AFL and the CIO, as well as the bona fide independent segments. I would simply repeat my earlier quotation from Perlman's Theory: "... Given the opportunity to exist legally and to develop a leadership from its own ranks, the trade union mentality will eventually come to dominate." And I would add, that this truth was clearly expressed by European trade union movements with long-standing socialist traditions, as those movements accepted the international principle of free trade unionism.

I want to conclude my remarks in the following vein: I have been meeting at regular intervals during the past several years, with the Department of Labor's Trade Union Advisory Committee on International Affairs, composed of high officials from the AFL, CIO, and Railway Brotherhoods. To see these men address themselves to problems of international policy has been for me an emphatic verification that "job-conscious" trade unionism is not a narrow, sectarian, and selfish phenomenon. It is, rather, as Professor Perlman has always suggested, the nuclear content of

labor's interest (so well described by Mr. Kaplan today), a content, which I have found, actually drives labor to expand, rather than narrow its horizons. The concern for liberty and dignity in practical terms on the job translates itself readily into a concern for liberty and dignity in other areas; and what is more, the nuclear concern of "job-conscious labor" supplies relevance and concrete meaning to the other issues, without which effective policies could not be formulated. And it is my own conviction that were a mature, "job-conscious" trade unionism more widely prevalent, with its self-conscious and inseparable affinity to democratic institutions, the world today would be a far safer and a far more progressive place.