

A Phase Two Strategy for the Left

“The Tension: the need for national leadership . . . and the need for social transformation of the movement itself before that leadership can be offered.”

THE 90 DAYS ARE LONG OVER. The freeze on the rights and livelihood of working people goes on. What can we do?

During the 90 days the movement went to school about economics. Much as in the first months of the escalated war in Vietnam, we learned as we taught, and in the process we roughed out an analysis of at least the domestic side of the new economic policy. Still, now the 90 days are over. The question presses: What can we do?

The new economic policy gives the Left an opportunity to reach the mass of American working people—an opportunity it has not had since the end of World War II, and which will remain no matter what the AFL-CIO and the five labor bureaucrats on the

Pay Board may decide to do. The overwhelming likelihood is that the contracts of the autoworkers (Woodcock), steelworkers (Abel), teamsters (Fitzsimmons), and most other major unions will be honored—even when the deferred pay increases in their existing contracts amount to a higher annual rate of increase than the 5.5 percent allowed other workers in new contracts. If this happens, there will be no general strike calls from AFL-CIO headquarters. The five labor members will stay on the Pay Board, thus institutionalizing the phenomenon of a labor aristocracy and in a very literal sense selling out other working people.

Regardless of that decision, a ferment, an openness to new ideas, an atmosphere in which general strikes can be talked about for the first time in a generation, will continue.

The time is ripe for clear national leadership in response to the new economic policy. Pursuing the analogy of the early months of 1965, one sees the need for an equivalent to the SDS march on Washington in April 1965. Whether it took the form of a march (as in April 1965) or parallel work holidays in cities across the country (as in October 1965), a national event, in which national demands were made on the government which now openly manages the economy for the sake of the huge corporations, is much to be desired. It would represent a continuation of the antiwar movement's semi-annual protests, and presumably demand an end to the war in Indochina, reduction in the military budget, and curtailment of military bases overseas. But the sponsorship of the march would need to be new and the thrust of its demands would need to be different:

- Labor and public members of the Pay Board resign
 - Jobs or income for the unemployed
 - No taxation of the necessities of life (exemption from Federal income tax of incomes under the BLS moderate budget of \$10,500)
 - No wage freeze on incomes under \$10,500
 - Prevent the export of jobs by prohibitive taxation of the export of capital
- and so on. There is little chance that

the AFL-CIO or even a significant number of international unions would support such a march. But there is widespread support for this kind of action among the rank-and-file. At the Illinois AFL-CIO convention in early October, a resolution was adopted calling for a one-day work holiday and a march on Washington.

An event of this kind, decentralized or in Washington, would signal the ad hoc formation of a national opposition to Nixonomics and the coming-of-age of a new politics for the 1970s.

That is one side of the tension. The other is the Left's isolation from most of the people who might march or strike on such an occasion.

This isolation can only be overcome slowly. Program is the answer because program is precisely what the new economic policy makes possible: but it must be down-to-earth program which enables movement people in workplaces and communities to meet people face-to-face and carefully include them in local action units. There is no substitute for that process. Inviting union officers to speak at mass meetings will not do it. Leafleting strangers at factory gates will not do it. Projecting media-visible events which are presumed to speak to working peoples' interests will not do it. Either the movement is capable of incorporating ordinary working people at the local level now, as co-workers in its new activities, or it should forget about significant response to Nixon's policy. We have no right to presume to speak for working people unless we are tangibly in the process of incorporating working people in what we do.

HERE THEN IS THE TENSION: On the one hand, the need for national leadership; on the other hand, the need for social transformation of the movement itself before that leadership can be offered.

I am convinced that this dilemma can be overcome. (It has to be overcome.) If we can remain sensitive to both sides of the tension I have tried to describe, and resolve to be both daring and patient—leaders in some ways and followers in others—then there is realistic hope of building a mass movement for people's control of

the economy. Here are some concrete ways to move toward that objective:

1. *Local Programs Unified by Common Principles: Tax Initiatives and People's Price Freeze.* In many states (we do not know how many) it is possible for the people at large to place a new law before the legislature or on the ballot by "initiative," that is, by a petition signed by a requisite percentage of the state's population. The AFL-CIO in Ohio has put before the state legislature in this way a tax bill which would tax corporate profits, tax the removal of natural resources (coal, limestone, oil, and so on) from their natural state, tax certain banks and insurance companies presently lightly taxed or not taxed at all, and shift the overall tax burden from the working-class taxpayer to the corporations. The Peace and Freedom Party in California has launched an initiative to tax capital gains more heavily.

The strength of such a program is that it forces organizers to meet new people face-to-face and raises fundamental questions about the distribution of wealth and income. Its weakness is that people participate superficially, by signing a petition, and have no obvious method of follow-up action. (This is not to say that follow-up actions could not be devised. One thinks of sit-ins at the local offices of recalcitrant state legislators, marches on the state capitol, and the like.)

A people's price freeze program has the opposite combination of strengths and weaknesses. It touches a superficial aspect of distribution of wealth and income: the final prices charged by individual retailers. But it has many advantages. Everyone is affected by prices, including students who must pay for tuition, books, rent, food, and in some cases utilities. Action around prices is easy for a small number of people to begin without the guidance of organizers. And action around prices not only forces the organizer to meet new people face-to-face, but in contrast a tax initiative leads naturally to escalated local actions: rent strikes, supermarket boycotts, nonpayment of utility bills. Because of these advantages of simplicity and decentralization, program around prices appears a good place for the anti-

Nixonomics organizer to begin.

The handle most readily available in a price freeze program is the Price Commission ruling of November 11: "Retailers are to post prominently their freeze-period prices for all covered food items and for many other selected items, other than food, as will be specified in the regulations. Until all such selected prices are posted, retailers are not permitted to increase any prices. In any event, such freeze prices must be posted no later than Jan. 1, 1972." (*The Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 1971)

The objective of a people's price freeze would be to prevent any price from rising more than the 2.5 percent which the President and the Price Commission have projected for 1972. The government will not commit itself to the position that no price should rise more than this percentage; but the people can.

Variants of a people's price freeze might be a campaign to roll back prices by repeal of the sales tax on food, drugs, and other necessities (but this raises all the problems of a statewide tax program), or a campaign against the huge rate increases requested by telephone, gas, and electric utilities.

Both tax initiative and people's price freeze programs run the danger of losing themselves in specifics and failing to raise clearly general principles. Michael Lerner's suggestion for "people's control boards" is a partial answer: if tax and price demands are made by counter-institutions which in themselves call into question the legitimacy of the entire wage-price control policy, there will be less possibility of opportunism. (On the other hand, if people's control boards do not have specific programs which can win some small victories they will have a hard time creating and maintaining credibility.) In addition, it is important to articulate a few simple principles which guide all our activity in response to the new economic policy, and endlessly repeat these principles in all we do.

First, "WE SHOULD CONTROL THE ECONOMY" (or, "LET THE PEOPLE CONTROL THE ECONOMY"). The fundamental question is not whether the wage guideline is too low, or whether profits and interest rates will be frozen, or whether prices will rise more than

the 2-3 percent projected by the President. The fundamental question is that the government is now openly managing the economy for the sake of the huge corporations. The people must assert their right to run the economy. We must seek democratization, through workers' elected public bodies (non-governmental as well as governmental), of all decisions about allocation of resources and labor; i.e., a new decision-making process that assures to working people control over their own labor, over their own lifetime, over their use of their resources, in short over themselves.

The crucial point to be made is that the people are barred from even raising these questions, let alone dealing with them in a practical way, so long as the decisions of the production and distribution system are considered to be outside the sphere of democracy and within the sphere of private property. All decisions concerning production and distribution have to be removed from the sphere of private property and "taken back into" the civil sphere of democratic discussion, debate, and planning.

The federal government has enacted a parody of this process. Abruptly reversing its opposition to economic controls, the government has taken advantage of a vague congressional resolution to impose an indefinite freeze. The American public has had no say whatever in the decision to have economic controls, or in setting any of the guidelines, or in choosing the people who will carry out the policies. We have been subjected to a domestic equivalent of the decision to escalate the war in Vietnam.

We must challenge not only the decisions but the right of the decision-makers to make the decisions. The long-run goal of people's control (socialism) must be clearly in view at all times.

Second, "WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO WHAT WE NEED TO LIVE." We are not content with the Democratic critics' goal of freezing profits, dividends, and interest along with wages and prices. This would freeze a distribution of income which was grossly unjust *before* August 15. We simply do not believe it fair for those who have title to wealth—and do not work for their "profits,

dividends, and interest"—to continue to benefit as they now do. We wish to challenge this basic arrangement. This is one thing we mean when we say, generally, that we oppose capitalism.

We think that people who earn their incomes (blue and white collar) should receive a better share, that those who receive unearned income should receive less—and ultimately, in a decent society, should receive nothing merely because they have title to property.

We also think that everyone has a right to life. In an economy as rich as the United States' the right to life should mean something more than bare subsistence. If the gross national product of more than \$1 trillion a year were divided equally among all 200,000,000 Americans, each man, woman and child would receive \$5000 or \$20,000 for a family of four. If 25 percent of the gross national product were deducted for new investment, a family of four would still receive \$15,000. This being so, it is fair and reasonable to demand that every American family receive annually the \$10,500 which the Bureau of Labor Statistics states is the moderate budget for an urban family of four.

This general goal should be broken down into more specific objectives: no taxation on income below \$10,500, no freezing of wages below \$10,500 a year (about \$200 a week), no payment of rent by those earning less than \$10,500 a year, and so on. And, of course, in proposing that goods and services which are presently paid for should be distributed free, we open up the possibility of talking more generally about the kind of future society we envision.

In summary, I believe local action around taxes and prices must be the heart of the movement's response to the new economic policy. This emphasis can be criticized from two points of view. First it may be said that the power of the working class is in the workplace and Left program should stress wage demands, preservation of the right to strike, resistance to pressure for work speedups. To this I answer: Those of us in workplace situations and in unions (as I am) should by all means push such a program. But most movement activists will be obliged to approach the new economic policy

from the side of the community; and I think it will be more natural and fruitful for them to work on problems which also affect them, like taxes and prices, and seek fraternal relations with rank-and-file groups in the workplace, than to pretend to be what they are not and to give leadership to people they do not know, about problems they do not understand first-hand.

Second, it may be said that local tax and price activity fails to recognize the aforementioned need for strong national leadership. I agree. Because tax-price program forces us to move outwards from the movement cocoon, to meet (other) working people face-to-face and develop our politics with them, rather than for them, I think tax-price program must have highest priority. But other program is also needed.

2. *Local Programs Unified by a Common Corporate Target: Action in Many Places Against (for instance) AT&T or A&P.* Activity against particular corporations has survived in a few places, for instance the Honeywell Project in Minneapolis. In general it has suffered too much from tactical emphasis on stockholders' meetings (for which I consider myself partly responsible), and too little effort to form alliances with rank-and-file workers. These are remediable defects. Here are two particular possibilities:

First AT&T and its subsidiaries have asked for \$1.9 billion in rate increases. This corporation is also a major imperialist investor in Latin America, and under pressure from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission for its systematic discrimination against blacks and women. In all those states where AT&T subsidiaries have asked for rate increases far in excess of the 2.5 percent price guideline, movement groups could use this as a jumping-off point for a campaign against other abuses, too.

Second, the network of food cooperatives is one of the most tangible embodiments of the movement across the nation. I propose calling all these groups to a conference sometime in the spring to plan a summer campaign against high food prices, bad food quality, low wages in the food industry, and corporate malpractice gener-

ally in this field. In effect one would be challenging these sturdy counter-institutions to be something more than an alternative, and to be willing to "take on" the corporations they have sought to circumvent. Perhaps it would be helpful to focus such a campaign on a single national food chain. Perhaps not. It would belong to the conference to decide.

3. *A General Strike and/or a National March on Washington.* Provided activity of the two kinds just discussed was happening, or beginning to happen, one or more movement groups might, under certain conditions, fruitfully initiate or participate in national happenings of the general strike-national march genre. The conditions seem to me these:

There would have to be substantial labor involvement. This involvement would have to be manifest before any public call was issued. In my opinion it would be irresponsible to call for a march on Washington, still more a general strike, on the untested assumption that six months from now there would be enough rank-and-file discontent for such groups and individuals to come to an action called by persons outside the labor movement. Further, the involvement should be local as well as national. A few union officials are not enough.

What might be done is as follows: A movement group might give itself, say, a couple of months to quietly approach individuals, caucuses, and unions both locally and nationally to see how much response might be forthcoming to a call for national action (this coupled with an approach to the same persons and groups for joint action on local programs). If even one national union, such as the AFT, or one major caucus in unions like steel or auto, were receptive, or if in a number of communities an ad hoc committee of rank-and-filers from many unions were for it, then all signals should be set at Go.

Staughton Lynd, a leader in the New American Movement, wrote this position paper for the NAM Conference held in Davenport, Iowa, November 25-28, 1971.

Beyond the Pentagon Papers

“The Vietnam experience shows the deliberateness with which Presidents, advisers, and bureaucracies . . . excluded disengagement as a feasible alternative.”

HOW COULD IT HAPPEN IN Vietnam that a “small” commitment in the mid-1950s became a massive one in the mid-1960s? Several former administration “insiders” have recently stepped forward, encouraged by Daniel Ellsberg’s release of the Pentagon Papers to provide answers. Beginning in the Eisenhower years, we are told by George Ball, a series of “small steps” were taken “almost absentmindedly” until the United States found itself “absorbed” into Vietnam. It was “the politics of inadvertence,” Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., has written in evident agreement with

Ball. Yet the basic policies and concepts were right, says Roger Hilsman; the American failure was a failure of implementation, a case of inept execution. Quite the contrary, Leslie H. Gelb has argued in a recent *New York Review of Books* article: the decision-making system worked as its participants intended it to work, on the basis of a misguided consensus about the international and domestic political dangers of failing in Vietnam. Ellsberg, while supporting much of Gelb’s analysis, has added his own dimension to the discussion, arguing that Presidential concern about future elections and the threat of a right-wing reaction to withdrawal short of victory was the first “rule” of policymaking on Vietnam.

The Pentagon Papers tell me that all of these explanations are misleading or inadequate. Choices to escalate rather than de-escalate or disengage were made deliberately, not haphazardly; policies were not merely implemented poorly, they were ill-conceived; concern over elections explains why changes in policy may have been postponed rather than why they resulted in continued or increased involvement. If the “system” as a whole worked so perversely well, it was because there was (and is) in American decision-makers and decisionmaking a disposition to respond to failure in ways that will perpetuate the “success” of America’s mission abroad. The decisions that were taken on Vietnam—always to press ahead with the war, usually to expand it—reflected much more than calculations about the domestic and international repercussions. They were manifestations of deeper drives to preserve and expand personal, institutional and national power.

The most fateful decisions on Vietnam—those that enmeshed the United States ever more deeply and dramatically enlarged the perceived “stakes” in the outcome of the war—occurred during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. What motivated these two Presidents and their common cast of senior policy advisers to make these decisions?

In the first place, they shared a number of bedrock assumptions about American responsibility for maintaining the global status quo before the

challenge of communist-supported revolutions: thus the critical nature of the Vietnam experience for the United States and the “Free World,” and the psycho-political importance of being firm in the face of the adversary’s “provocations.” One need not search between the lines for these assumptions; they emerge clearly from numerous documents and statements. The same John F. Kennedy who in June 1956 had spoken of Vietnam as “the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike” also said as President seven years later: “We are not going to withdraw. In my opinion, for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam but Southeast Asia. So we are going to stay there.” Those who theorize that Kennedy was on the verge of disengagement before his assassination and cite televised remarks of September 2, 1963—“In the final analysis it is their war” and “they have to win it”—ignore the essential point: Kennedy, as he demonstrated in throwing support to the anti-Diem generals, wanted this war won whatever the deficiencies of, and obstacles posed by, Saigon politics. “Strongly in our mind,” he said in a less-quoted response on NBC television (September 9), “is what happened in the case of China at the end of World War II, where China was lost, a weak government became increasingly unable to control events. We don’t want that.” Kennedy would not “lose” South Vietnam, a determination that every South Vietnamese government then and since has learned how to exploit for accumulating aid without implementing reforms.

Well before the Tonkin Gulf incidents, it was recognized that increasing American involvement was contributing to the perceived value of South Vietnam, both for foreign and domestic policy. But this only lent greater validity to the “test case” hypothesis, according to McNamara (in a trip report to Johnson, March 16, 1964). The entire world, he wrote, regards the ‘South Vietnam conflict . . . as a test case of US capacity to help a nation meet a communist ‘war of liberation.’”

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by Melvin Gurtov