
Perpetuate the American Labor Alliance: This Should Be Made the Clearing House of the Workers in this Country.

by J.O. Bentall

A Dec.3, 1921 letter to the CEC of the CPA. Comintern Archive: f. 515, op. 1, d. 84, l. 42-45.

Comrades:

There has been some talk of liquidating the American Labor Alliance [for Trade Relations with Russia] just as soon as the Workers Party has been organized. Before the ALA is dropped we should take a good look at the situation and make sure that this organization is no longer necessary.

For the purpose of getting the matter before the comrades I want to make the following suggestions:

First of all, I have very strong reasons for advocating that the ALA be perpetuated. I also feel very certain that we should organize the Workers Party.

But the political party is not sufficient.

Here is an outline of the suggestion as far as space permits:

I. We now have a central organization that can function in any capacity where the workers are involved.

We must have an organization that can go into any community when necessity demands and take charge of the situation and lead the workers in a logical and intelligent manner toward the goal of final working-class control.

1. In case of strikes.

Long before a strike is called we should be on the job and anticipate the outbreak and be ready to take charge. We should have organizers and speakers and literature agents and leaflets and periodicals, such as papers, weekly and daily publications, ready to place

the plans and method of action before the strikers promptly and continually as long as the struggle lasts.

Just now there is an outbreak in the stockyards in Chicago. There is no leadership there. There are no publications to inform the strikers of the facts. No systematic effort is made to educate those workers. No one has charge of the commissaries and strike aids. The ALA should put itself into shape to take up a situation like that and be in full control. It should be the agency to unite all the various organizations and help perfect the ones that can be used and recast the others. It should get every nonunion worker into the union best fitted.

There are the Colorado and West Virginia situations. We should be there with the goods and use our wits to get the workers enlightened and organized.

The Garment Workers are in a struggle. The United Mine Workers are about to break up. The Railroaders will soon be in revolt.

In all these there is a lack of leadership. There is no one except the reactionary officials to carry the workers along. They have always led them astray. They will do so now. The ALA should be ready to take the lead in all these outbreaks. We should have a propaganda squad to distribute papers every day and keep the strikers posted. We should have meetings wherever possible.

So much for strikes. The opportunities are innumerable in times of strikes.

2. In Times of Famine.

One of the greatest opportunities we have ever had is to tell the workers the truth about capitalism as well as about the workers has been during the present

drive for aid for Soviet Russia. The organization of the "Friends of Soviet Russia" by the ALA is an instance of good sense on the part of the radical element in this country. While this is temporary it shows what an organization can do.

3. Unemployment.

If the ALA had been strong enough to take advantage of this opening, much could have been done. We should be ready to handle this situation and make use of every hungry man for the revolution, for this is the only time some can be educated.

4. Defense.

As long as the present system lasts there will be persecutions and it is necessary to take care of the comrades as far as possible. The ALA should be in shape to handle this. It should be behind the National Defense and control it.

5. The Farmers.

So far we have no effective propaganda among the farmers. It is well understood that we must reach the farmers. We cannot get along without them. The ALA can do the preparatory work among the farmers and get them interested and intelligent on the revolution.

6. Education.

The workers must establish their own printing plants and their own literature. We must have our press — daily, weekly, monthly, and special. We must be in shape to publish books. We must carry on classes and schools. We must prepare teachers and writers and speakers. The ALA should be the agency to carry out all this. One of its functions should be this whole work of education in its broadest sense.

7. Political Action.

Among its other functions should be that of putting forth a political party and using it for all it is worth at times when a political party can be of value

to the movement. The ALA should be the manager of the political party and use it as it would use any other instrument to promote the revolution.

8. Work Among the Unions.

The work among the unions is of the greatest importance. The ALA can be made the most effective agency for this work. All loose organizations can be collected and affiliated. New industries can be organized and the new unions placed where they fit. As a great organization of all kinds of workers, the ALA can gain an entrance where no other agency would be admitted.

To sum up:

We must have a central organization around which all others may gather. This central organization must be in shape to do everything that has to be done to get the workers in line for the overthrow of capitalism. Any organization that stands for the overthrow of capitalism should be eligible and made use of.

II. A political party cannot do all that a central body such as the American Labor Alliance can do.

I need only mention the above departments to make it clear that it is impossible to use a political party in as broad a sense as we can use the ALA.

We cannot come to a strike field with a political party and tell the workers we want to take hold and help. We certainly cannot take charge. The best we can do is to help them with money and some speakers and possibly with the press as far as we can. But to meddle with their organization and show them how to act in the industrial field would quickly be resented. A political party is not adapted to that kind of work. It can do some work and should be used where possible but we should not rely on it for everything.

We cannot go into the farming situation with a political party. The Nonpartisan League has made tremendous gains in its way because it is not a political party.

A political party cannot become the best agency for educational work. People are prejudiced against politics. A union will hardly ever let a political party

speaker in to address the union. The leaders take advantage of this situation to keep the radicals out. But it would be easy to get a hearing as "The American Labor Alliance."

So in all other lines of activity. The very words "politics" and "political party" afford a stumbling block.

I want to remind the comrades of the fact that the capitalists have a Chamber of Commerce that functions broadly as I suggest the ALA should function. Their Chamber has its finger in the pie all over. Its subsidiaries are the Citizens' Alliances, its Commercial Clubs, its civic federations, and all kinds of clubs. But the directing force comes from the Chamber of Commerce. Why should not we have a Chamber of Workers?

The capitalists do not try to run the banks and the schools and the political campaigns with a party. They use the Chamber of Commerce. They use it for loan drives and for war propaganda and for Americanization and everything from a strike to a prayer meeting. They do not use a political party except for the purpose of putting over what the Chamber of Commerce decides upon.

Let us get this clear. The old Socialist Party was once radical and went as far as it could, but it was handicapped as we will be handicapped if we try to get along with only a political party.

The control of the ALA will be easy — as it is

controlled now. The ALA can then control the political party and be entirely safe.

The details of the organization are an easy matter. Affiliations can pay a small percentage of dues into the ALA and keep it supplied with the necessary money to carry on the work properly. All the united organizations that now contemplate unity in a political party would naturally be members as the new party will be affiliated. Already we could count on 100,000 if we go after some of the outlawed unions and such organizations as the Wood Workers and International Machinists and numberless others now detached. The miners are about to split and we shall have a place for the lefters among them to land. The opportunities are so great that they overwhelm us. We can get mighty powerful if we retain the ALA.

This has been outlined altogether too hastily, but the idea is here and we must work it out and make an organization that can adapt itself and be able to function wherever the workers are and wherever they are in a struggle.

Fraternally submitted,

J.O. [Bentall]

Duluth, Minn.
Dec. 3, 1921

*Edited by Tim Davenport. A few minor grammatical corrections made silently.
© 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2004. • Free reproduction permitted.*