

Leo Huberman

— How to Spread the Word



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NOTES ON LEFT PROPAGANDA

BY LEO HUBERMAN

Agitation, based on information, brings lasting converts to socialism; agitation, based on exhortation, does not. Failure to understand this simple fact is perhaps the chief defect of Left propaganda in the United States.

Truth is on our side. It is the job of the socialist propagandist to present that truth in its clearest and most persuasive form. It seems a pity to have to point out, at this late date, that jargon and name-calling neither clarify nor persuade. The use of Left "short-hand" such as "fascist beast" or "running dogs of imperialism" may be the easiest way out for the overworked Left writer but it makes no sense to those readers not already in the charmed Left circle. And how often have even those of us who are convinced socialists been embarrassed and made uncomfortable by the "arguments" in the Left press!

Yet the truth is so overwhelmingly on our side that we can understate the case with far greater effect than is gained by the overstatement of which so many Left writers are guilty. What is the need for exaggeration or distortion when the facts shout our story so convincingly? And those facts are obtainable from unimpeachable sources—either out of the mouths of reactionaries or their spokesmen, or from government publications.

Do we want to prove that the mass of people in the United States are not as well off as Right propagandists would have us believe in their perpetual paeans of praise to our "high standard of living?" Government income figures in official publications prove the point. On August 4, 1948 Mr. Leon Keyserling, Chairman of the President's Council of Economic Advisers, testified before the Senate Committee on Banking and Currency, that:

About 50 percent of all families had incomes below the \$3200 a year estimated by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to be necessary to maintain an urban family of four at a reasonably satisfactory standard of living. Between a quarter and a third of all families had incomes of less than \$2,000 a year, and more than 10 percent had incomes of less than \$1,000 a year.

I submit that a few figures such as these are much more convincing to those who have not yet seen the light than tons of invective which serve only to annoy the reader or listener.

Do we want to suggest to the uninitiated that there is a perpetual conflict between capitalists and workers and that what is good for the workers will be opposed by the capitalists? A quotation from Marx or Lenin won't be convincing. But one from a big capitalist will—one like this from Mr. Charles Luckman, former president of Lever Brothers, to the ninth annual convention of the Super Market Institute on November 7, 1946:

Why is that during the past 20 years American Business has become identified in the *public mind* as opposed to everything that spells greater security, well-being, or peace of mind for the little guy? . . .

We got the reputation we have because, by and large, *we earned it*. How? Well, we *declared war* on collective bargaining. We actually *opposed* increased taxes for education. We *fought* health and safety ordinances. The record proves that we *battled* child labor legislation. We *yipped* and *yowled* against minimum wage laws. We *struggled* against unemployment insurance. We *decried* Social Security, and currently we are kicking the hell out of legislative proposals to provide universal sickness and accident insurance. . . .

Where on the record is there a single example to show that Big Business ever *initiated* a legislative program of benefits for the workers? Is it not clear that they have always waited until they were *asked* or *forced* to do something?

Do we want to make our uninformed American aware of the relationship between the state and the ruling class? It's no good telling him what Stalin says on the subject. He won't believe it—any more than we are likely to believe Mr. Churchill on the advantages of empire rule to the colonial people. But he will at least begin to think seriously about the matter if we tell him what a President of the United States wrote on the subject while he was in office—Woodrow Wilson in 1913: "The masters of the government of the United States are the combined capitalists and manufacturers of the United States."

Do we want to teach the evils of capitalist monopoly? What left-winger has ever driven home the point more forcefully than the Temporary National Economic Committee of the United States Congress: "A more nearly perfect mechanism for making the poor poorer and the rich richer could scarcely be devised."

No need to labor the point. The material we need is available.

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Irrefutable facts and conclusive opinions from unquestionable sources can be obtained to bolster our arguments. They are not always easy to find—but they are worth the time and effort needed to unearth them, for they carry conviction as nothing else can.

Digging up the supporting material is only the first part of the job. Since nearly all the avenues for reaching the people are firmly in the other side's hands, our own effectiveness will be measured by the imagination and resourcefulness we use to put our material across. Let me cite two concrete illustrations. The fight for higher wages for workers is a never-ending one. The usual arguments are familiar and, for that reason, generally fall on deaf ears. On June 7, 1950 the *National Guardian*, using 1949 figures collected by the Labor Research Association, dressed up the old argument for workers in a more striking manner in a box on the front page. Here are the first three items:

<i>What the Boss Got</i>	<i>The Firm</i>	<i>What You Got</i>
	Amer. Tel. & Tel.	
\$209,450	Chairman Walter Gifford	\$2,693
	General Motors	
586,100	Pres. Charles E. Wilson	3,430
	Amer. Tobacco	
460,748	Pres. Vincent Riggio	2,409

This, I suggest, is agitation through information—the best kind of propaganda. It is more effective than paragraphs of name-calling about the lousy company and the greedy boss.

[The *Guardian* could have made the case even better by making the huge sums paid to the bosses easier to grasp. Take the third figure, for example—\$460,748, that's too huge for the imagination to cope with. But break it down to a weekly figure and make the comparison and here is what you get:

<i>Pres. Riggio's Weekly Wages</i>	<i>Worker's Weekly Wages</i>
\$8,860.53	\$46.32

Now, make some further pertinent analyses:

1. President Riggio gets more than three times as much in one week as the worker gets in a year.

2. He gets \$1265.79 every day, Sundays included. That's 27 times as much as the worker gets each week.

3. He gets \$52.74 every hour of every day around the clock, waking or sleeping—\$6 more than the worker gets each week.]

In 1949 when the CIO United Steelworkers of America was

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battling the steel companies for an increase in old-age pensions, the *Daily Compass* carried a story by Steve Fischer which is a perfect illustration of what I mean by agitation through information. The headline ran

THEY'VE BOTH WORKED HARD FOR U.S. STEEL

Benjamin Fairless' Pension: \$76,537.00

Andrew Girasek's Pension: 3.21

And the story—a gem of its kind—began this way:

Benjamin Fairless and Andrew Girasek have devoted their lives to the United States Steel Corp.

They have been loyal, hard-working men. As such they are both deserving of pensions—and they get them.

Fairless is going to retire in a few years from his job as president of the corporation.

His pension: \$76,537 a year.

Girasek is a few years older than Fairless, so, after 44 years of work as a rigger, he retired two years ago.

His pension: 29 cents a month, or \$3.21 a year.

Fischer told the story straight and the *Compass* played it straight, with pictures of Girasek (caption, "For him: \$3.21 a year") and Fairless ("For him: \$76,537 a year"), and photostats of two letters from the company to Girasek informing him of the amount due him and taking the "opportunity to wish you many enjoyable years of your retirement." The only name-calling in connection with the story came from the reader when he was finished—which is precisely the effect to be desired.

Sticking to the truth is a good principle for the Left not only when it seeks to convert others to its side, but also when it talks to its own followers. If a Left candidate runs for office and hasn't a chance, why not say so? The answer that is usually given—that people won't vote for a loser—shows a lack of faith in the very working class whose virtues the Left leaders sing so loudly. And what of the disillusionment that follows when the extravagant claims are shown to have been hollow?

The recent mayoralty election in New York is a good case in point. Considering the hysteria of the times, the 350,000 votes cast for Vito Marcantonio was a truly impressive showing—in its proper perspective it was something to be proud of. But in the light of the fantastically reckless predictions that Marcantonio would win, the good showing was turned into a defeat.

It's not true that everything must be presented to workers in blacks and whites. There is absolutely no justification for the belief

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that they won't comprehend the grays. Why must every Left candidate be sold as a god? Why not state specifically his virtues and his defects, and why he is to be supported in preference to candidates X and Y? To do otherwise leads to hero worship which in 99 cases out of a 100 must end in disillusionment and despair since so few leaders are of the stuff of which heroes are made. There has been far too much emphasis on Left leaders, far too little on Left philosophy. The time and energy spent on extolling the virtues of this or that Left leader would more properly be spent on expounding the principles for which the Left stands. That is the only way to build a core of steadfast people who know the score—and without such a solid base, success can never be achieved by the Left.

When MR printed the article "Cooperation On the Left" we received a few letters attacking us, not because the criticism we made was not just, but because "such criticism plays into the hands of the capitalist class." Has this familiar argument any merit?

It may be that the capitalist class can use such criticism against us, but we must take that risk. For the primary question we must always face is: What is the most effective way of convincing doubters? And the answer is, surely, that you can't possibly persuade anyone to have confidence in you unless you are honest enough to admit what he knows to be true. How far can you get with a person who doubts the value of trade unions if you won't concede that some unions are racketeer-controlled? Why should he listen to you any longer if you won't admit obvious truths? He won't listen. He will be antagonized, and rightly so. Those Left propagandists who refuse to admit mistakes, who cover up weaknesses with a lot of double-talk instead of admitting them in a forthright manner, lose the respect of their listeners and the opportunity for further education is thereby ended.

A fundamental socialist principle that cannot be emphasized too much or too often is that the enemy is the capitalist system, not the capitalists. It is a mistake to paint individuals as fiends (the current Number One Fiend seems to be John Foster Dulles) but for whom all would be well. That is simply not true. Capitalists act as they do because they are driven to do so by the system. We are not interested in arousing people to hatred of evildoers. We are interested in getting people to see the need for replacing the system.

Or are we? So little socialism is preached by the Left that one is forced to **wonder**. Left propagandists have discarded (correctly, of course) the **hopelessly** sectarian position of constantly talking socialism while being aloof from the day to day struggle. But they have gone to the other extreme of concentrating almost exclusively on

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the day to day struggle while hardly ever explaining its relation to socialism.

Isn't the belief current in Left circles that getting people to vote for progressive candidates, to fight for peace, to be active in consumer organizations, to protest the suppression of civil liberties, is to move them toward socialism? And isn't it true—as the leaders of scientific socialism have shown again and again—that these struggles, of themselves, will *not* make socialists unless the lessons are drawn, the moral made plain? A vehicle toward the goal, yes, but only if it is steered in that direction. If not, it is a vehicle which never reaches the goal but comes to a halt in a bog of reformism.

No one can really be counted on our side who has not had a solid grounding in the fundamentals of socialism. And that takes time. It means working with people, playing with them, becoming their friends—and always teaching them. It means educating them through the day to day struggle, not only to be against capitalism, but to be *for* socialism. It means converting people to socialism not in some distant future, but now.

HOW TO SPREAD THE WORD

BY LEO HUBERMAN

In the late 1930's I sat in on a course of education for trade unionists. That these workers had a desire to learn was evident by their enrollment in a class held in the evenings, after they had done a day's work. That the teacher knew his subject was manifest from the brilliance of his lecture. That the combination of students' desire and teacher's grasp of the material did not result in learning was obvious from the fact that before the hour was over, several members of the class were asleep; it was apparent, too, from the decline in enrollment—the next class was attended by only half the students, and the third time the class met, less than a quarter who had signed up were in attendance.

This, by and large, has been the experience in trade union education in the United States. Union officials, badgered by the pleas of the education director to appropriate the small sum needed for trade union classes, finally yield, reluctantly. The classes are held, and they fizzle. The union officials then declare triumphantly, "See, the workers don't want to learn." The teacher, saddened by his experience, agrees. But the conclusion is totally wrong: it isn't that the workers do not want to learn—that is seldom the case. The cause of the failure is that *the teacher does not know how to teach*.

This experience is not unique to trade union classes. It happens with radical groups, too. And it happens in underdeveloped countries where revolutionary ardor fills new classrooms with enthusiastic workers and peasants—and poor teaching, just as quickly, empties those classrooms.

This need not happen. Workers and peasants, no matter how impoverished their previous educational background, will stay the course, and they will learn, if the teaching they get is good teaching.

What is good teaching? What did that teacher in the trade union class do wrong? He had talked for about ten minutes when a hand went up and a student asked a question. It was a thoughtful question. The teacher should have felt flattered—he had said something which had stimulated one of his listeners to think. He should have felt like hugging the questioner—instead, he was annoyed. The smooth flow of his carefully planned lecture had been interrupted and he put off the questioner with “I’ll come to that later.”

His mistake was in being concerned only with subject matter; he should have been concerned with students. He was a lecturer, not a teacher. The lecturer teaches subject matter; the teacher teaches people. The difference is crucial.

Obviously, where classes are very large and the lecturer stands before so many faces that he cannot possibly know them as individual human beings, good teaching by my definition, is not feasible. Here the lecturer does his job well if he masters his material and presents it in as lively a manner as possible. But that trade union class had only 17 students and in a class that size (up to a limit of 25) it is easy for the teacher to get to know his students as individual human beings with varying backgrounds, and good teaching is possible.

It is possible because the teacher can base his lesson on the background and experience of the students and, by skillful questioning, get them to participate in the learning process. The subject matter is no longer an end in itself but a vehicle for making the students think, for giving them tools for understanding the world and their position in it. From the lecture hall, students emerge with a body of information; from a good classroom discussion in which they have participated actively because the subject matter is keyed to their experience, students emerge with an analytical approach to problems, with a comprehension of underlying forces.

The subject of the first lesson in that trade union course was an introduction to the capitalist system. As I said above, the teacher gave a brilliant lecture beginning with feudalism, the change to capitalism, the words of Karl Marx, exploitation of

the working class, the whole bit. But he wasn't *teaching*, he was *telling*. He was telling the working class in words what it had experienced in life, instead of drawing from that experience the analysis he wanted the students to make.

Here below is a summary outline of the way the same subject was taught to a group of trade unionists in a workers' summer school. It should be noted that in this class and those that followed, no one went to sleep, the lively discussion was enjoyed by both teacher and students, the students were enthusiastic about the school, and tests showed that they had, in fact, learned what was taught them.

No tape recording of the class session is available so it should be understood that the questions and answers are only a fragment of the whole, listed merely to show the approach, to give the flavor of the discussion, to clarify the technique.

Questions

Answers

Where do you work?

- Students give the names of the companies where they are employed. (This question serves the additional purpose of helping the teacher to get to know his students and the students to know each other in their first meeting.)

Why do you work?

- Have to work in order to live.
- Can't eat without working.
- Just gotta get that dough each week to pay the rent.

Does the man who owns the factory work alongside you?

- (Laughter) That'll be the day.
- I've never seen him.
- My plant is owned by a big corporation.

Have you ever seen the stockholders of the corporation working in the plant?

- No, they don't work there.
- Of course not.

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But you all agreed you *had* to work in order to live; now you tell me there are some people who live without working. How come?

- They don't have to work because they own the factory.
- They get profits from the business.

Then there are two groups of people in our society. One group, to which you belong, lives by.....? And the other group to which your employer belongs lives by....?

- Working.
- Owning.

(Teacher writes on blackboard)

2 groups

Workers — live by working

Employers — live by owning

Have you always had work?

- Yes.
- I was laid off for five months once.
- My factory was closed during the depression for over a year.

Mary says her plant was closed down for over a year. But she works in a textile mill. Didn't people need the shirts her mill turned out? And Henry's refrigerator plant, he tells us, was shut down for five months; didn't people want refrigerators any more?

- Sure, people needed shirts but they couldn't pay for them because they didn't have any money, so the boss had to shut the mill down.
- When Henry's boss couldn't sell his refrigerators, he closed the plant.
- If I were him I'd have done the same thing. He's gotta make a profit or he must go out of business.

You mean to say that even though people needed shirts and wanted refrigerators, unless the owner made a profit, he closed up?

- Yes, he's in business to make money.
- If he doesn't make money, he shuts down the plant.
- It doesn't matter if he's a good guy or bad guy, unless

he makes a profit, he has to close up.

What you are saying, then, is that in our system of production, goods will be produced only if there is a profit?

- That's right.
- Unless there's a profit, there's no production.

Was that always true?

- Guess so.
- No, there was a time when people made what they needed for themselves, when they needed it.

Why don't they make shirts, and refrigerators, and washing machines, and autos for themselves now?

- Don't have the money.
- You need factories and raw materials and expensive equipment to make the things people want nowadays.

Let's sum up what we have discussed so far. You say that in our system of production there are 2 groups (teacher points to blackboard):

Workers — live by working
Employers — live by owning

The employers live by owning (teacher writes on blackboard)

The employers own:

the factories equipment, machinery raw materials	}	the means of production
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The employers own what is necessary to produce goods in our society. This system of production is called (teacher writes on blackboard)

CAPITALISM

Object — not to produce goods as needed
but
to make a profit

HOW TO SPREAD THE WORD

Now let's continue. The owners of the means of production, the employers, are also called capitalists. Which of the two groups, workers or capitalists, have more power? Why?

- The bosses have the most power because they have more money.
- The capitalists have the most power because if they don't give you a job, you can't pay your bills.
- The capitalists have the most power because if you don't work you starve, if they don't work they've got enough money to live on.
- They own the means of production.

What gives them more power?

Which group has the most power with the government? Let me answer that question by reading a quotation from a book written a long time ago: "The facts of the situation amount to this: that a comparatively small number of men control the raw material of this country; that a comparatively small number of men control the water power . . . that the same number of men largely control the railroads; that by agreements handed around among themselves they control prices, and that same group of men control the larger credits of the country. . . . *The masters of the government of the United States are the combined capitalists and manufacturers of the United States.*"

The man who wrote that was in a position to know. He was President of the United States

when he wrote it. His name was Woodrow Wilson.

In our next lesson, we will discuss what the working class can do to protect itself from the power of the capitalist class.

It is apparent from this lesson that a discussion does not mean merely aimless talk leading here, there, and everywhere. The good teacher must know his subject as well as the lecturer; he must have the same mastery of his material but, in addition, he must give thought to the best way of presenting it in terms of the experience of his students. He must have a lesson plan. This does not mean such strict adherence to his plan that he won't be quick to pick up and pursue this or that interesting point arising from the students' response—but it does mean that he must not be sidetracked indefinitely. His lesson must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. He must know before the discussion begins the basic points he is going to make and he must make them.

A key point to remember is that the discussion must never be allowed to become a dialogue between teacher and a student with the other students feeling that they need not listen until a question is directed specifically to them. The students must listen carefully to other student responses as well as to teacher questions. There are techniques for establishing this continual participation. "Do you agree with what John just said, Philip? No? Then what's your answer to the question?"

In this connection, the good teacher never makes the mistake of calling upon students in order. When the first question is directed to Student A, the next to Student B, and the next to Student C, there is no need for Student Z to pay any attention because he knows precisely when he will be invited to participate; until that moment arrives the discussion can become irrelevant to him.

There is an even more important reason for not calling upon students in a set order. The good teacher is concerned

less with subject matter than with the people he is teaching. He wants them to learn to think. If he is alert and has done his job well, all the students will have participated in the discussion before it is over and he will then be aware of their background and capabilities. He will *know* his students, and consequently he can direct questions to them in accordance with their varying ability. The easy questions will go to the less able students—it is important for them to get a feeling of accomplishment—and the more difficult, more subtle questions will be directed to the brighter students—they must be extended to the utmost or they will lose interest.

The good teacher never teaches a lesson without using the blackboard, and he should insist that the basic points he writes on the blackboard should be recorded by the students in a notebook, along with other notes they choose to take themselves. There is a sound reason for the blackboard and the notebook: some people learn by hearing; some people learn by seeing; some people learn only by using their muscles; and almost everybody learns best by a combination of all three. Thus, the discussion itself will be suited to those who learn by hearing; the basic points on the blackboard will help those who learn by seeing; and writing in the notebook will drive the points home for those who must use their muscles to learn. The notebook with the fundamentals of each lesson therein recorded, will be of use to the student for review purposes and, for the brightest ones, it can become a tool for teaching others when the need arises. And the need already exists for more classes for workers, newcomers to the radical movement, and peasants in the underdeveloped countries.



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