

HG1-18

The Threat of Rank-and-File Power

and

The Assassination of Dow Wilson

Eric Johnson

By Eric Johnson

published by
New England Free Press
791 Tremont St
Boston, Ma. 02118

This article was originally published in the July-August 1967 issue of PL, the national magazine of the Progressive Labor Party. Copies of PL are available from: PLP, Box 808, Brooklyn, N. Y. 11201.

The threat of rank and file power and -

THE ASSASSINATION OF DOW WILSON

By Eric Johnson

Capital has so effectively bought the labor bureaucracy that very few militant or honest rank-and-file officials exist in the USA. Especially at this time of war and inflation, when pressures on the working people are steadily increasing, workers must be equipped to wield their maximum organized strength against monopoly capital, including a fight in the all-important political field. But to do this the decks must be cleared. As the Progressive Labor Party's trade union

Eric Johnson is an apprentice carpenter in the San Francisco Bay Area.

program demonstrates, the key task is the overthrow of the Meany-Reuther cliques by an aroused membership—that is, by forming a wide rank-and-file movement based on caucuses in the existing unions. Several such caucuses already exist in various parts of the country, and in nearly all locals some form of struggle against the piecards is emerging.

Because of the great importance of these movements, it is particularly instructive for militants to understand the events leading up to the murders in the Painters Union in San Francisco. This rank-

and-file movement has reached a high stage of development. It is still forging ahead despite the brutal assassination of its key leader, Dow Wilson.

Wilson's leadership was continuous for some thirteen years. His militant history spotlights the failure of the left in the labor movement since World War Two. Because of his central role in the victories of the Painters, it is important to assess him as a historical figure and as a martyr of the working people, and to understand what his guiding theories were.

Dow Wilson rejects the CPUSA

Dow Wilson's ideology was developing during the purge of the left from the CIO after World War Two. Wilson shipped out in his teens, and was a member of the left-led National Maritime Union on the West Coast. His beginnings as a union activist and communist around 1945 were typical of his style. He barged into a line for grievances in the NMU office and demanded union retaliation against a ship's captain who had thrown him off the ship and refused to pay his overtime. The NMU representative, a communist, told him to wait his turn and cool off. Wilson insisted that the captain should at least be given a dumping. The NMU man told him how the union grievance procedure worked: Wilson swore the NMU steward on board ship was chicken.

The next day the NMU man produced the overtime, having gone through channels. Wilson, impressed, started hanging around the hall, going out on beefs with the organizer. One day he said, "are you a communist?" (Yes.) "Well, why don't you ever talk to me about it?" (Well, busy. You only been around a couple of days.) "Well, why don't you ask me to go to a meeting?" And after going to the meeting: "Well, when the hell are you going to ask me to sign up?"

Not too long after joining the Communist Party, the young Wilson was assigned to assist the NMU's organizing drive on the Isthmian Lines. He resolved to show the "hacks" how to organize seaman into the Party, and immediately set to work trying to sell his shipmates on what a great outfit the C.P. was. Instead of undertaking patient

and steady ideological work, he stuck his neck way out, and wound up rebaited off the ship, with no support from the crew.

The response of the old-timers in the C.P. was to insist on his expulsion. Charged with "adventurism" and the like, he was stiffly disciplined by the Party. They could not help him correct this adventurism by suggesting better ways of carrying out revolutionary ideological work, because they had no such plan—only an opportunistic approach. Thus began Wilson's long-standing distrust of leadership in the party, which was aggravated during the next few years of intense struggle in the NMU.

Wilson's fighting, defiant outlook was damped down in respect to ideology and politics by the experience with the C.P. At that time the Party was controlled by the reformist bureaucrats who had all remained in leadership after their chief, Earl Browder, was removed by international censure and membership pressure in 1945. In the period after 1945 they were maneuvering desperately to maintain control, expelling the left wing, and simply continuing Browder's line of class harmony under subtler forms. The year after Wilson joined, the California C.P. endorsed top oil lobbyist Ed Pauley's Democratic candidate for Governor. They refused to expose the Tidelands oil giveaway, because it might reflect badly on their candidate, who supported the steal. At the same time they fought against a Machinist strike, expelling their own members who took part, and encourag-

ing open strikebreaking, because the strike was "adventurist and semi-trotskyite."

Fellow NMU members who worked with Wilson recalled that "there were two paths open to you; you could move up in the trade union leadership, or you could advance in the Party apparatus. The most able guys were in the trade union movement." The Party encouraged the idea that being a trade union official was the highest goal, and found itself tailing the whims of the CIO leadership all through this period. As another result, the Party apparatus men who acted as Maritime section leaders in the Party, or TU section, county committee, etc., were not the men with any mass sense, and were often far removed from the struggles they gave advice on. Thus these "theoreticians" could not command respect. A friend recalls that at the time he was recruited, and for a while after, Wilson took great interest in Marxist theory; but soon he became deflected from this by the Party's overriding economism, and its glorification of trade unionism at the expense of revolutionary ideology.

Through the rest of the late 40s! Wilson was engaged in the struggle of the left to hold on in the NMU. In the 1947 NMU Convention he was something of a floor leader. Around this time Joe Curran, the "center" force that the C.P. had worked with ever since the NMU was founded with him as president, began to get his orders on the post-war anti-communist attack. The tide was turning against the C.P. Curran was able to get a majority resolution against

"Communist disruption tactics," although vice president McKenzie, a C.P. member, had a Party-line political report approved at the same convention.

In 1948 Wilson was active in a strike of Union Oil tankers in a coordinated effort with Oil Workers. Curran used the events surrounding this walk-out to issue endless propaganda about wild, disruptive communists on the West Coast. By the 1949 convention, 500 communists had been expelled, including vice president McKenzie. Wilson was one of the few floor leaders for the remaining left wing delegates, and he was in continuous battle with Curran. The session ended with Curran screaming wildly that Wilson should be thrown bodily from the hall, and threatening Wilson's backers in the gallery. Delegates from the floor yelled "why don't YOU throw him out, Joe?" Finally Curran was forced to let him stay, but stripped him of his vote.

Wilson clearly was a brash, fearless fighter, who inevitably earned the rage of the reactionaries. But the policy of the C.P. "defense" was to deny or avoid the communist issue, to insist that everybody was a good American, to accuse the Curran machine of "splitting the Union, raising a false issue." Against this Curran had mounted a gigantic political attack, in a resolution that eventually passed the purged convention, proving on the basis of the international situation, history of communism in the union, etc., that the union should bar C.P. members from membership. It was not a "false issue." It was THE issue. It was not merely an attempt by the opposition to grab the union; it was part of a national ruling class drive to smash the hold



An early seamen's struggle

of the left on industrial workers. In the face of this attack the C.P.'s evasive, civil libertarian defense did not have a chance, although the seamen rank-and-filers who fought Curran were certainly giving it everything they had. Curran had power; that was the key. And this was class warfare: the ruling class was certainly not going to push Curran to abide by the constitution! In one of Wilson's speeches against the anti-communist amendment, he stated the C.P.'s self-defeating program perfectly: "Yes, you have your right to be anti-communist, and I will defend your right to be anti-communist, but for Christ's sake, don't be anti-Union."

The C.P. maritime section leadership told Wilson to cool it and lie low when he got back to the coast—perhaps punishing him for "adventurism" again. But while he was staying away from the NMU hall, his friends discovered that the officials had started to build charges against him to boot him from the NMU

while he was away from the local. Wilson's friends started a protest and prevented the move, but Wilson was always a little suspicious of the advice given him by the C.P.; he felt that they set him up to get bounced. It fit in with the feeling among some of the more militant C.P. NMU-ers on the coast that the brass in the Party had lost the battle for them: through opportunist use of their union positions to push Party policy from the top, which gave Curran something to hang them with; and through the weak, non-political defense.

After the loss in the NMU was complete, Wilson's feeling was, as he said to friends, that "we'll never make those mistakes again." The mistakes he saw as primary were what he called the "resolution machine" — mechanical and opportunistic fights to pass progressive resolutions not based on a mass understanding. He naturally lost confidence in the historic role of the workers' party after the losing leadership C.P. leaders



Union wives picket Deputy Attorney General's home

had provided. However, he gained a lesson from the experience with Curran about the necessity of taking and holding power, as his subsequent work in the Painters Union indicates. The main effect was to turn him towards "pure trade unionism" without the "interference" of political issues. But he remained in the C.P. until Khrushchev's "revelations" about Stalin, when he quit abruptly. Evidently the commitment to socialism was not an easy thing to dislodge,

Building a painters' rank and file movement

After a short spell "troublemaking" in Los Angeles warehouses, he came into the Painters Union around 1952. Here, during the McCarthy period, he and a group of other left-wingers, some refugees from the NMU, set out to overthrow the corrupt leadership of the San Francisco Painters and merge the two existing city locals into one. With that as the agreed pro-

gram for the five, they started to build a broad caucus, based on a fight for rank-and-file control and one united local. They still met as a left-wing core, and would occasionally speak in the local on political issues. They agitated against the Korean war, and later spoke against the invasion of Guatemala in 1954. But in the main, the philosophy was, as recalled by one of the original

five, "sticking to the main issue" of trade union politics.

(Of course, a trade union must center on this main issue—it is not a general debating society. At the same time, a vital job for a left-wing core should be to bring home to the rank and file how many "outside" political issues are really inter-woven with their main issue. Without such work, too many workers will remain suspicious of progressive positions taken on "outside" issues—and redbaiting attacks and/or opportunistic retreats are likely.)

It was a big jump from seamen to painters. Painters are far more stable, and usually have much more commitment to the status quo. Like many other building trades skilled workers, "the bribed proletariat," they earn a relatively high wage, and some are able, without great capital, to become small contractors. The present wage scale is close to six dollars an hour in San Francisco, highest in the country. Even if a painter works only ten months he can make almost 8,000 dollars. But painters are faced with job loss to labor-saving devices (spraypainting, rollers), and, similarly to many other building trades workers, job conditions and security are rotten.

It is in the building trades that the reactionary, old AFL leadership has had its most reliable base. In these unions are found some of the most corrupt bureaucrats, the most flagrant tyranny. For these reasons, a movement for democracy, like the one Wilson started, can get quite a bit of rank-and-file support, because it can join all the other battles of the workers into the united demand for rank-and-file power.

The Wilson-led caucus

movement began much like any caucus must begin: with a core of dedicated militants, agitating on day-to-day grievances, proving in battle whose interests they would fight for, and taking the long-range, patient view that they could not change the whole relationship of forces overnight. Through their agitation, and the use of a rank-and-file bulletin, the membership's interest in the local increased. One early member recalls that there were usually twenty or thirty members at a regular meeting of the local, but that after several months of caucus work the meetings had jumped to 100 and more. Wilson and his group encountered no real goon tactics in these early days, but they were harassed frequently by the FBI.

One of the key issues on which they fought was the control of business agents. The International's plan was for business agents to be elected at large and paid directly by the District Councils, which were the foundation stones of bureaucratic rule. Wilson fought for direct election of business agents from the local, and direct payment from the local. Again, a struggle for rank-and-file power.

In 1958, after six years of agitation, and after the caucus had spread to the other San Francisco local, Wilson ran for business agent. After a battle against redbaiting, he won the post. The following year he led a drive to amalgamate the two locals. The motion lost by two votes in a tampered election.

The fight for one unified local is important as a blow against the craft nature of the building trades. The two Painters' locals (as with the three Carpenters' locals) in San Francisco had overlapping jurisdictions. In effect they

would compete with each other by offering lower conditions to entice contractors to hire from one or the other. The Internationals often oppose mergers in this kind of situation, because they know as well as the bosses that keeping the workers disunified is the best insurance for their prolonged rule.

In 1961 Morris Evenson, of the opposition, was elected to the business agent's post in the other local. In the following two years the Wilson group succeeded in merging the two locals into Local 4, and initiated the broader battle with the International. This came to the surface in the 1962 contract: the International opposed it for its high wages, and tried to influence the Bay Area Painters to relinquish control of tools. The contract was upheld locally, and the International's anger rose.

Control of tools was a key issue throughout; Wilson fought against the International's approach of helping the bosses bring in new "labor

saving techniques." He wanted no part of Harry Bridges' waterfront approach (that is, the "progressive" attitude to automation: "you can't fight progress"). Wilson's approach was that the union must conduct a battle of resistance under capitalism, and strive to control strictly the introduction of mechanization. At the same time the Painters won a seven-hour day, with future plans for some form of 30-hour week. (This is the approach advocated in the PLP Trade Union program: "No changes in methods of operation or production, such as mechanization or automation, without approval of workers. ... The principal way to deal effectively with the problem is to fight to shorten working hours with no cut in pay...")

In other struggles—such as attaining a reliable group of trustees for their improved pension fund — Wilson used militant tactics to fight off the attempts of officials in other Bay Area locals to undermine his efforts. The San Francisco local would organise



Dow Wilson's 14-year-old daughter Michelina (left)



Hundreds of Bay Area painters picketed Wilson's "trial" by the international when denied admittance to the hearing room (Nov. 1965). Wilson turned the tables on his accusers, forcing trial's halt in two days.

flying squads of rank-and-filers to go to the other locals and talk up the issues man-to-man before meetings. Through this kind of fighting from below, Wilson began to line up a base of support in the outlying locals. Some Bay Area officials began to side with Local 4's program.

In 1964 the conflict with the International escalated. Wilson, at the International convention, fought against a new leadership resolution to have business agents appointed by District Councils. The

motion, defeated by the delegates, was a clear attempt to head off the growing number of honest officials. It was introduced by Martin Rarback of New York, who has been involved in a big fraud and corruption scandal exposed by rank-and-filers in N.Y.C.

But it was in the 1965 strike that the conflict became sharpest. Here the collusion between union piecard and employer was clearly revealed. When the strike began, Local 4 set up a rank-and-file strike committee, headed up by a rank-

and-filer, a member of the progressive caucus (which had been maintained). The strike committee activated some 300 Painters to do the necessary picketing, organizing, and arguing with maverick locals. The key event took place when Ben Rasnick, of the East Bay District Council, convinced his Sacramento local to go back to work under the old contract, breaking the unity of the strike. He was called a fink and a strikebreaker by Wilson in a big rank-and-file meeting, and escorted from

the hall during a meeting of the Bay Area negotiating committee. Rasnick was strictly a Raftery (dynastic president of the International) man; his action in Sacramento stimulated the head of the Marin local to break from the joint negotiations and sign a back-door agreement, giving in on the use of tools—without ever informing the membership. The Peninsula District also broke away from the joint Bay Area negotiating, which was led by Wilson. Local 4 worked desperately to hold the strike together by sending out delegations to the rank and file of these breakaway locals to convince them that their leaders were sabotaging the strike.

After 6 weeks of militant rank-and-file policing in San Francisco, and Wilson's partial success in holding the phony locals in check, the S.F. contractors broke and signed the contract Wilson was after. It gave them the best contract for Painters in the country, restricting mechanization, vaulting wages over the five-dollar line, and bringing solid fringe benefits. This was a bitter pill for the International, because it exposed their class-collaboration policies.

At the end of the strike, Ben Rasnick brought charges against Wilson. The International took up the case, and the other local officials that had tried to weaken the strike added their accusations of "interference." Rasnick charged that Wilson had called him a fink and a strikebreaker ("unbrotherly" conduct).

At the trial, Wilson defiantly stated that the accusers WERE finks and strikebreakers. The Local turned out a 300-man picket line at the closed hearing, which had a big effect on the outcome. The combination of rank-and-file pressure and Wilson's

straightforward counterattack forced the International hacks to back down. They finally issued a condemnation of Wilson's flying-squad tactics, but dropped the proceedings. They had attempted to take over Local 4's records, but were thrown physically out of the offices and then legally blocked from doing so.

Following this victory, Wilson again blocked a Raftery move—a plan to get the painters who do street-striping for the city into a different local with far inferior conditions. The charter was transferred without notifying Local 4 or the city painters. Wilson and a delegation went to the state convention with pickets outside, and rallied a huge vote against any breaking down of the Painters into further craft divisions.

Wilson then went East to visit rank-and-file groups around the country. He had decided to run for vice president of the International, and was attempting to consolidate the widespread support he had attracted from U.S. locals nationwide. On his return, he told friends that the International had offered him a quarter of a million dollars to cool off. He had instructed them to "shove it."

On April 5, 1966, right after he returned, having chosen the path of struggle rather than take the bribe that imperialism has used so effectively in the labor movement, Wilson was shotgunned in the back outside his union office late at night. Everyone was caught off guard. He was only 40 years old, and he left behind a wife and three children. Many rank-and-filers responded quickly and came to the aid of their local. Two thousand people attended a funeral meeting held three days later, but what was on



"...The greatest pleasure I enjoy in living is bringing to fruition an idea ... successfully... by the process of struggle..." — Dow Wilson, in a letter to a friend, March 31, 1966. everyone's mind was left unsaid: that the International had assassinated Wilson. The local along with some other unions put up a big reward, but there was not much reaction from rank-and-filers in other industries. Wilson's work was not yet known except to the Painters and the left, and many building industry workers thought that some phony had got "hit" for a gambling debt.

This assassination, like the killing of Malcolm X, was a direct attack on the working people's right to organize and fight in their true interests. It was a cowardly, desperate act, and shows the thin veneer of "democracy" that hides the ruthless tyranny of this system. This is the face of imperialism that the Vietnamese and the majority of the world's peoples see daily. One should never bury the rage felt at his murder, but nurture it. Here is the true source of revolutionary determination: love of the people, and hatred of their oppressors. As a

rank-and-filer put it in a letter to the Union newspaper:

"...It makes me sick to my guts, to think that this could have happened to a man like Dow... I would like to say to every member that the greatest tribute we can pay Dow, is to continue the battle he waged, the fight he fought against the phonies and finks... Already they begin to crawl from their holes, assuming that our strength has departed with the physical departure of Dow. Let us again show them the error of their slimy, self-seeking ways... we must insure... that the finks and phonies remain where Dow buried them, where they so rightly belong, in the dung heap where they were hatched.... Militantly yours,
John Davidson"

Just a month later, Lloyd Green was murdered in the East Bay. Green was killed just after having successfully influenced his Hayward local to vote for direct election and payment of Business Agents. The previous night he had been indirectly threatened by an International representative, to scare him out of a fight for Wilson's policy. With this killing, the anger of the rank and file surfaced. Many of the caucus members in Local 4 joined with Wilson's family in an active campaign to get justice. They pressured public officials like the mayor, started a vigil at a street rally, and opened the regular local meeting to the public. At this meeting they announced they would no longer pay their dues to the International, and exposed the fact that the International had not even sent condolences on the death of Wilson. Some implied publicly that they would take justice into their own hands, and some ideas circulated of having a work stoppage in the city to force the police into action.

The city got the message. The whole labor movement was in an uproar, and at the

public meeting even the phonies were threatening to "tie up everything." Three days later, the case was "solved." A bundle of corrupt contractors from Sacramento were caught and accused of slaying Wilson and Green because the union leaders had caught them embezzling from the Union welfare funds. The explosion was headed off.

In the ensuing months, the city and press tried very hard to show there was no "larger conspiracy." The motive was strictly limited to the idea that Wilson had begun an investigation of the Sacramento funds, and these guys killed him because they were caught redhanded. However, the suspicions of the rank and file were not diminished. The big hole in the case was that Green had had nothing to do with the fund investigation; so why kill him, except to defeat the Wilson movement in Green's Hayward local? Also, since it was no doubt true that these men had been using the funds for investment, there would very likely have to be a union accomplice in the Sacramento local; and it just happened that Rasnick, the International stooge who brought Wilson up on charges, was very much involved with that fund.

As the trial of the contractors proceeded, and one was convicted (Norman Call), there was a break in the theory. Call was apparently left in the cold by his cohorts, and decided to spill the beans. He said that Rasnick had actually directed the whole assassination. Rasnick has subsequently been indicted and tried once, only to get a hung jury. His second trial is yet to come.

The conspiracy is now supposed to be limited to Rasnick; the motive, a revenge killing for the insults and defeats

Rasnick suffered at the hands of Wilson. This is no doubt one aspect of Rasnick's motivation, just as it is true that the Sacramento contractors were speculating with union funds. But the real reason for the killings is to crush the rank-and-file movement, and the real assassins are the International officers and the whole political machine that the AFL-CIO top piecards run for the ruling class. The use of union funds as sources of capital for business investment—in effect setting up a whole second corporate structure to exploit the labor of the worker—is completely in harmony with the political policies of treachery and sellout that these Internationals follow.

The ruling class and the government apparatus on various levels will do a great deal to keep all these links from coming to light. It is of strategic importance to them to have control through these stooges, and they would much rather see the working people blame a slimy bunch of small capitalists for the assassination, than expose the true nature of these International "leaders." But through exposure of Rasnick, and their continued battle with the International, the Painters have made it pretty clear to their members that the real culprits are still up there.

The local has by no means given up its fight since Wilson's death. It has slowly regrouped, with Morris Evenson as leader, and are again actively building the rank-and-file movement around the Bay Area and nationally. These forces have maintained their independent newspaper, and have had some real success in seeing progressive candidates elected to replace some of their old foes. There have

been rank-and-file conferences, and the pressure has been put on the AFL-CIO leadership to investigate the Painters' International. This last effort resulted in a showdown between Evenson and Meany that forced Meany to O.K. an investigation.

Recently the local decided to march in the Spring Mobilization against the war, as a form of memorial to Wilson. This is a new development, since the new leadership has mainly carried on Wilson's philosophy of keeping politics out of the local. In the California elections, the local went for democratic Governor Brown, because, as Evenson put it, "you have to play the game."

These recent events help in making an assessment of Wilson's over-all contribution, and of the significance of his movement. Clearly, it was not a one-man show. The movement was not stopped by murdering Wilson. Many of his friends felt that his big weakness was his individualistic style, and there is plenty of evidence to bear this out. It is also said that he did not consciously train successors. But the fact that the struggle has gone forward is proof that he taught the painters enough in the actual battles to give them the confidence to lead now.

From a long-term standpoint, Wilson's real weakness—a weakness which is evident in the work of the movement—is his political pragmatism. Cool the politics, build the union—this approach, carried out by an honest militant like Wilson, can bring great short-run success. But to consolidate that success against the broader attacks of the ruling class, political awareness by the rank and file is needed.

Wilson's approach to "out-

side" causes—such as civil rights or anti-war protest—which he knew should be supported, was to try and work around the membership, or try to slip it to them, always distrustful of the political consciousness of the members, afraid of a backfire. For example, Wilson opened up the union to the point where Latin membership is almost one thousand. But this was never made a point of discussion in the local. He fought to break the color line on the Golden Gate Bridge painting crew, and his local generally knew where he stood on leading issues, as he usually participated in marches and demonstrations. But his C.P. experience, instead of inspiring him to look for effective ways of linking up "outside issues" with the union, made him wary of bringing these issues into the local at all.

Today, when the U.S. working class has NO organized political power, Wilson's refusal to press for new ideas in the political interests of labor, and his pragmatic alliance with the liberal Democrats based on favors received, really held back the development of the ranks. This approach of insisting upon tangible small favors in return for political support may have been an advance over the old C.P. opportunist politicking, but it tended to involve him in about the same political maneuvering that C.P. encourages labor officials to do now. Again, a formula for short-run success.

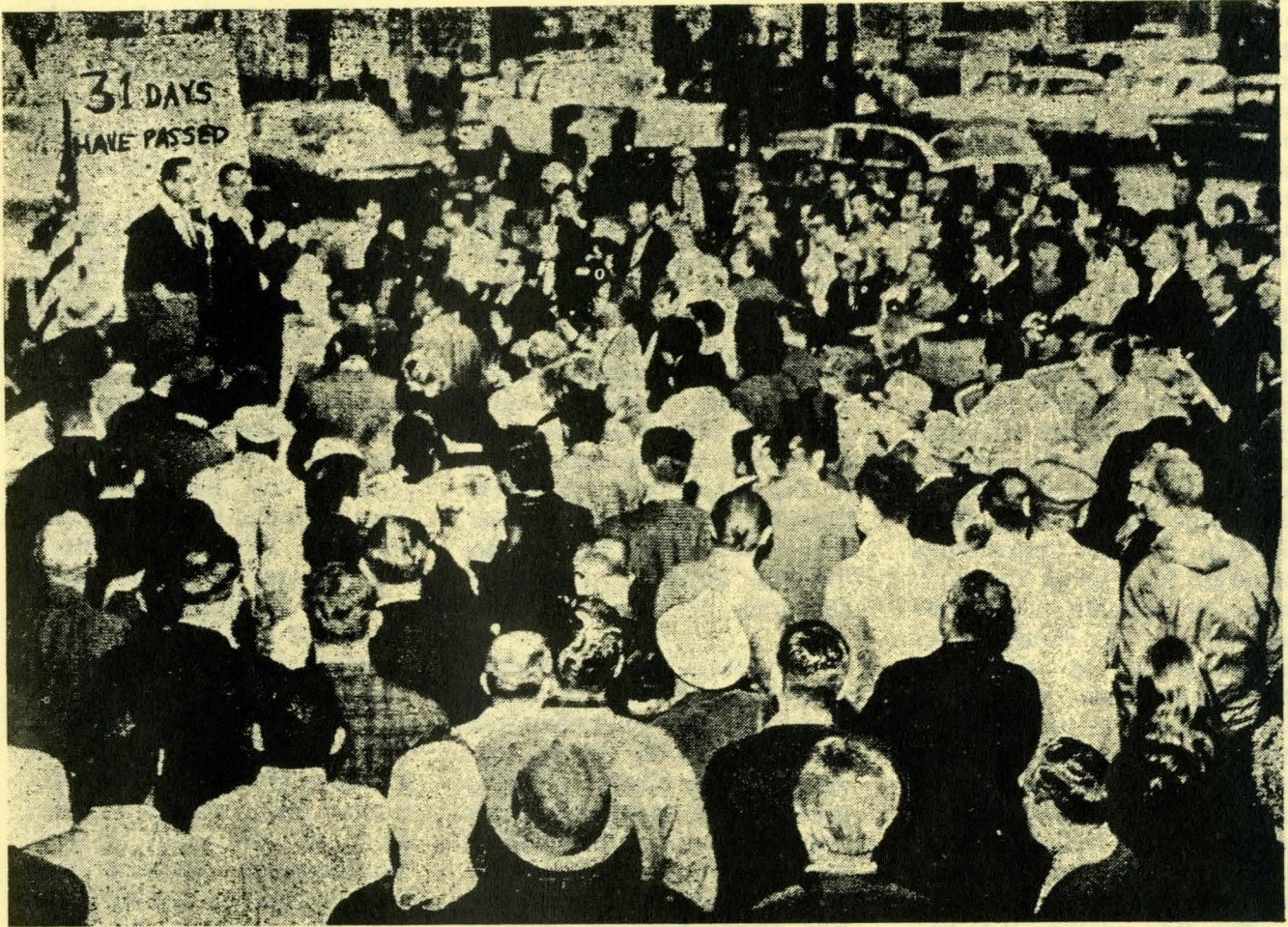
In the memorial issue of the Bay Area Painters News, issued right after his murder, the editors said:

"...Dow opposed discrimination... Prejudices, he believed, divided working men when they needed all their unity to win their

short-range struggle for a better standard of living, and their long-range struggle for a world in which reason and the interests of working men and women would prevail... He also opposed the war in Vietnam. Because Americans throughout the country are divided on that issue, he did not inject the war in his public discussions. The unity and strength of the Painters was his immediate urgent concern. He wouldn't allow himself to express opinions which might divide painters on extraneous issues... But let it be said now that he thought the U.S. should never have gone into Vietnam... Dow Wilson should have this, his final word, in the great debate that is rocking the nation."

It is ironic that Wilson had to be dead before he would state his political views in the union. The key element in the above quote is the idea that such things are "extraneous" issues. Can anyone really believe that the most savage imperialism that ever existed is "extraneous" to the members of a trade union in the home of that imperialism? Was the same thing said by social-democratic trade unionists in Germany as their new Reich seized power? Wilson never found the real lesson to be learned from the dumping the communists took in the NMU: they claimed then that the communism issue was "extraneous," but it was precisely on the political front that they were beaten.

Wilson's interest in the growing young left movement was some indication of change in his outlook. He read the literature of groups like PLP, and took pride in the fact that his son went on the 1964 Cuba trip. He would argue for hours about new developments and ideas, and had respect for all gestures of defiance at the establishment. One friend found him at home brooding over a beer once: Wilson explained he was upset because it was



At the spot where Wilson was slain, street meeting demands murderers be brought to justice.

his birthday, he was 36 years old. The friend could not understand what was so bad about that. "Look, I'm 36, and all I've got going is this little Painters movement; at 36, Fidel had won the revolution already!"

In spite of political weaknesses Wilson was no class collaborator. Clearly, he was shot for his strengths, not his weaknesses. The C.P.'s revisionist ideology is based on making deals, on avoiding struggle, on unity with the mis-leaders at any cost, even a sellout on porkchop issues. The Painters movement, however, truly took up a war for rank-and-file power, and engaged the bosses in a serious class struggle for conditions. This line of struggle, especially against the AFL-CIO

leadership, could not have stayed non-political much longer; eventually the ruling class will step in to protect its puppets or buy off the new leaders.

As this happens, it is possible that the Painters will move forward politically. At least their alliances with the liberal Democrats have not been made into a principle of coalition politics, as with the revisionists, but are offered only in return for favors in the struggle.

History shows that the battle for rank-and-file power in the unions is a necessary step toward higher level class struggles. In the developing rebellion of the ranks nationally, which *Life* magazine, *Business Week*, *Fortune*, etc., have all noted fearfully, a

most important question is whether Marxists can take part in the crystallising leadership of the new movement. In blasting right into their home territory, Wilson exposed for thousands the true role of the AFL-CIO tyranny. And in the S.F. local he secured a reliable base for further battle against the mis-leaders. We are just beginning to see the importance of that base in the San Francisco labor movement.

In developing these struggles, one can see that the first stage, for the rank and file to win power back from the ple-cards in the locals, must unite the broadest base in the membership. But the caucuses must have a firm progressive core, because, as the first stage ends, the question becomes:

what shall this new union be like, now that it is in democratic hands? In answering this, the Marxists must fight for a class-struggle program on all fronts: against craft outlooks, racism, capitalist politics, etc. Some of Wilson's caucus members feel that after the victory in uniting the two locals, there was never a new program developed by the left core; and that since then, Wilson led more-or-less instinctively on a line of fighting the International and getting solid contracts. Militants must learn from this experience to lay the groundwork for the time when they must develop a firm progressive program for a local. The early stage, in opposition, is comparable to a struggle for independence in oppressed countries: once victory is achieved, there is a similar danger that united-front demands for freedom and autonomy will slide into a program of "bourgeois-nationalistic" isolation from the issues which unite all workers.

For this reason, it is important that the movements develop ties in the early stages with rank-and-file movements

in other unions. Wilson was beginning to see this, as he took an interest in the caucus developed in the S.F. Carpenters. The new Painters leadership is still fighting "its own battle." They have not yet seen the necessity of a geo-political base: unity with progressive movements in the area, rather than just a vertical alliance within the Painters. They are definitely in a position to stimulate rank-and-file developments in other construction unions, quite possibly around issues such as the war and the depression in the construction industry. This turn away from fighting only "their own" battles and towards political opposition can only lead to victories.

If radical political leadership does not develop in the ranks, Local 4 may very well wind up like the NFWA, co-opted by the slicker political machines of imperialism now beginning to move in the labor movement to line up the militants behind a "reformer" like Bobby Kennedy. Without the guiding theory that the ultimate aim is to destroy entirely the system of capital-

ism, and that the working people must seize POLITICAL power, any trade union rank-and-file movement can wind up in the hip pocket of imperialism. As Mao Tse-tung said, "Not to have a correct political point of view is like having no soul."

In all, we must give great credit to Dow Wilson and his movement. We must always ask whether a man has held the working class back or brought them forward. By this measure, it is clear that Wilson's movement for rank-and-file power broke open a new front in the class struggle. That he failed to lead the class struggle into the political arena, outside trade-union politics, is a serious weakness, but this is not an irreversible situation if revolutionaries do their work. We are not judging him against a Debs or Haywood, but only as a leader of workers in a particular battle which is a key front at this stage of U.S. workingclass history. Dow Wilson will be remembered for his defiance of paper tigers, his determination to fight and win, and his fierce loyalty to the rank and file.

