

[Late Spring 1968]

[retyped]

DON'T BEG--TAKE IT, IT'S YOURS!

Politicians talk about poverty as if it were a natural disaster, like some rare disease, and regard the poverty programs as a form of charity. But people don't just happen to be poor--they're poor because they have low-paying jobs or no jobs at all. And the people who make them poor are the people who control the supply of jobs and level of wages--in other words, the owners of American business. Does this group have a stake in keeping millions of people impoverished? You bet they do! Every trade unionist knows that when large numbers of people are unemployed or are earning starvation wages, it's easier to hold down everybody's wages. We shouldn't draw a hard line between "the poor" and workers in general. Many workers who don't think of themselves as impoverished may well find themselves out of a job one day or forced to take a big cut in wages. The fight against poverty is in the immediate interest of all workers.

The reason that your so-called friends on Capitol Hill, like Sen. Percy of Illinois, are giving you the royal run-around is not that they are personally hard-hearted or that there isn't enough money available. This is a fantastically wealthy country. The U.S. government spends more on war and the war industry than most other countries produce, total. Despite this wealth, millions of Americans are poor because the people who run this country, in the White House and on Capitol Hill and in the board of directors' meeting rooms, want it that way. They want it that way because a large group of poor and powerless working people keeps the better-paid workers in line.

How To Take It

The history of the anti-slavery and the trade union movements teaches us that the U.S. ruling class gives nothing out of good will. Rulers never make real concessions to the oppressed unless they're forced to. While the recent French general strike is far from being an unqualified success, the government, after three days of general strike, offered the workers more than it had offered them in the previous ten years. There are important lessons here for the anti-poverty, civil rights and trade union movements. The only way to gain our objectives is by aggressive political and economic struggles on the part of the entire workers' movement. Too many people, particularly the trade union leaders, see coming down to Washington as an isolated act of charity, like reading to a blind person every six months. Poverty is caused by the basic working of the economic system and can only be eliminated by mass struggles. Sympathy demonstrations of poor sharecroppers, welfare recipients and their friends are not going to do it. The trade unions can play an important role here. For example, one of the French strikers' demands was for an end to unemployment. An all-out campaign to organize non-unionized labor, particularly in the South, is also an essential step to help the poorest sections of the population. Organized workers should fight for 30 hours' work at 40 hours' pay, which would provide enough jobs for all the unemployed.

And as important is the struggle on the political level. It's obscene for people to have to come here and beg their "representatives" for the right to live. You elect them. You pay their salaries. And they sit at their comfort and leisure and decide whether to give you enough to live on or, even, whether to permit themselves to be bothered

by your presence. You don't know, from one day to the next, whether Congress will make concessions to the Poor People's Campaign or call out federal troops to smash your skulls in. We should throw them all off that Hill and replace them with men absolutely responsible to the working people who elect them. The American workers, both employed and unemployed, need a labor party to represent them--a party that takes its orders from them and acts in their interests. The Spartacist League believes an important step in building such a party would be running a labor party ticket in the '68 elections. Now is the time to break with and break the racist, anti-poor, anti-labor Democratic and Republican parties.

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