

L. Foster.

(Adapted from No. 94.)

Contracts.

The contract is another favorite Socialist scheme of ebbing the fighting spirit of the workers. The domineering central committees tie the workers up with contracts that force them to scab on each other. They call this procedure "fighting the boss." At first the stiff-necked employers couldn't see the beauty of this plan. But they are learning that there are more ways of killing an elephant than feeding it to death on peacock tongues. The contract system is becoming popular with them. So much so that the highest court in Germany has held it to be legally binding. Unions have been severely "strung" financially for breach of contract. In Hamburg, 1906, a few wood workers, locked out as a result of taking May Day off, got sore and struck. Their employers claimed this was a breach of contract and sued the "Woodworkers' Union." This organization crawled out of the affair by placing the responsibility on the local union. The latter was mulcted 6,500 marks and costs of five year legal proceedings. Needless to say, the legal rights of the unions as complainants in such cases can only be discerned with a powerful microscope. They are invisible to the naked eye. But as the Socialist motto is "Peace at price," this little hinderance don't stop them from making contracts. They say for the labor movement to grow it must have "rest." Contract ebullism is a very efficient soporific.

The principal demand of the employers during the great building trade lockout in 1910 was that all contracts should be made through the central committee—thus excluding even the perfunctory meddling of the local unions. They succeeded in tying the whole building trades of Germany up in a three-year contract, and in exchange granted the workers a few paltry concessions. This was hailed by Socialists all over the world as a great victory, but it was only by the most skillful juggling that the rebellious local unions were made to accept their conquest.

A Berlin brewing workers' "Kartell contract" gives a fair idea of the usual method of carrying on this contract warfare. Thirteen national unions with members employed in the brewery in question insisted on helping the "Brewery Workers" to formulate their demands. They all agreed that in case of a strike of one category of workers that the rest would remain at work until their respective central committees endorsed the strike. Fine chance for modern union tactics where the consent of 14 national committees has to be secured in order to tie up a brewery.

"Positive Success."

To disprove Kautsky's contention that the Socialist unions are at the end of their period of usefulness, Legien in his "Sisyphusarbeit oder Positive Erfolg," attempts to prove that they are a great success. As a working basis he takes Calwer's statistics of a 27.5 per cent increase in the cost of living in Germany from 1895 to 1908, and then shows how some of the stronger unions have increased their wages still more in the same period. Naturally Calwer's figures are warped to make the increase in the cost of living seem lower than it really has been. Exact knowledge on the increase is practically impossible to secure, but 30 to 40 per cent would probably be nearer than 27.5 per cent. The building trades organizations and a few others particularly favored by the unexampled prosperity of the last dozen years, and the weaker organizations of their employers beat Calwer's figures by a few per cent. The printers' results during this period are, however, a fair gauge of the general success of the unions. Since 1896 until 1906 their wages have increased 22 1-2 per cent, or 5 per cent below Calwer's figure.

In 1906 they were tied up with a national contract for ten years. Whilst the price of living goes soaring these workers, bound by this contract, which they dare not break under servitude of the severest legal penalties, can console themselves with the thought that they belong to the "progressive" Socialist unions. The miners, textile and metal workers are also in bad shape. They are opposed by modern combinations of capital and are almost defenseless. Legien don't venture on any figures of their "success." They can't even get contracts to hold their wages at their present levels. "Vorwarts"

gives a long table of figures on the rapid decline of the wages of the miners. A few are: Prussian miners, per shift, in marks, 1907, 4.51; 1908, 4.27; 1909, 4.07. Yearly wages in marks, 1907, 1529; 1908, 1298; 1909, 1234; a decrease of 124 marks in three years. It will doubtless take the miners some time to achieve their emancipation at this rate of "progress."

All told, the material success of the German Socialist unions is but little if any better than that of the A. F. of L. unions. And naturally, as the tactics of the two groups of unions are essentially the same. They are both defensive organizations. The A. F. of L. recognizes capitalism as a fact, and in reality is aiming to make wages keep pace with the increase in the cost of living; and the German unions as far as their own action is concerned do likewise, they leaving the task of overthrowing capitalism to the "ballot box stuffers."

If they can exhibit more "success" as a result of their efforts than the A. F. of L. unions, which is doubtful, it is chiefly because they are more favored by national conditions than the A. F. of L. The immense unemployed army that characterizes the U. S. is largely absent in Germany. The latter's industries, particularly farming, are not so well developed as in the U. S. They soak up thousands of workers who in the United States would be unemployed, and thus a dead weight on the labor movement. The army occupies another 700,000 men, as soldiers alone, not to speak of the thousands of workers employed in producing war material, the numberless functionaries, etc. And then the German employers are not so well organized as those in the U. S., though their organizations are rapidly taking on the more modern trust form. Where this form is strongly developed, as in the textile, mining and metallurgical industries, the German unions are naturally almost as helpless as the A. F. of L. unions in similar circumstances. To successfully oppose these modern capitalistic organizations they must escape from the tutelage of their political guardians, who won't permit them to fight for fear they will discover their true strength. They must adopt modern methods of industrial warfare, sabotage, general strike, etc. They must become aggressive and "carry the war into Africa," or, as Kautsky says, their period of success is at an end.

It is very difficult to see wherein the boasted progressiveness of the German unions lies. Their one feature that might justly be labelled "progress," i. e. their gradually fusing into larger groups, I have shown to be a distinct disadvantage to the movement by making the power of the bureaucracies ever stronger and rendering aggressive tactics more impossible. In all other respects they are at a standstill; as far as development of their fighting abilities is concerned. How long they will consent to thus rest tranquil and be led by the political movement and oppressed by their masters, is problematical. But as the employers, emboldened by the helplessness of the unions, are facing the issue by making Germany the classic land of the lockout, perhaps they may foolishly go so far as to drive the workers to revolt against the peaceful counsels of their leaders; a revolt that seems hardly to be expected from any other source as the workers are so absorbed in the political situation that only a real jar can call their attention to their true interests.

W. Z. FOSTER.

THE STRIKE IN NEW ORLEANS

New Orleans, La., Oct. 4.

Solidarity:

I am sending you a ten days' prepaid subscription to the "Item," commencing October 2. We are in the midst of a general strike of the railroad men (shop federation). This strike was by the men, against the orders of the Federation officials. There are no strike benefits. It is men against red tape. The men are way ahead in their tactics from five years ago. They are talking "a fair deal and no trouble," but the scabs are getting it all around and the company property is suffering.

The men employed are sending loaded cars everywhere but to the right place. Engines are coming in crippled; accidents are happening, such as loaded cars breaking loose on inclines, etc.

C. L. GRIFFING.

PORTLAND, OREGON I. W. W.

Portland I. W. W. Headquarters and Free Reading Room, 309 Davis St. Business meeting, Sunday at 2 p. m. Stereopticon views and lecture every Sunday night at 8 o'clock.