

The Labor Movement in France

By WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

Paris, Aug. 30, 1921.

In all Europe there is no more interesting labor situation than that in the French General Confederation of Labor (C. G. T.). There the conservatives and revolutionists are waging a fight to the finish against each other. The points of conflict are the classic issues of labor in Europe today: the conservatives want to keep the trade union movement in the path of class collaboration taken by it during the war, and to maintain its present affiliation with the Amsterdam International; whereas the revolutionists are striving to bring the organization back to its old-time program of class struggle, and to make it part of the Moscow International.

Both factions are highly organized and animated with a determined spirit. The conservatives are in possession of the official machinery of the C. G. T. and most of the national unions. The revolutionists, consisting of Syndicalists, Communists, and Anarchists, control most of the local and departmental labor councils, which have great influence in the French labor movement. They also control a number of national unions, most important of all the National Federation of Railwaymen.

Boring From Within

But the vital center of their organization is the Revolutionary Syndicalist Committee (C. S. R.). This is an immense machine for "boring from within," or as the French say, for conducting a campaign of *noyautage*. Mark well the word for it is destined to become famous. The organization of red-cells or *noyaux* parallels the trade union movement in all its ramifications. In every local union there is a group, or *noyau*, of revolutionists working ceaselessly to win the organization to their point of view. All these local *noyaux* in the various crafts and industries are linked together into national committees to correspond with their respective unions, and the national industrial committees are in turn united in the national body of the Revolutionary Syndicalist Committee. The latter maintains its own newspapers and headquarters from the funds contributed to it by sympathetic unions. It also holds its own national congresses, just before those of the C. G. T. Indeed it is a cardinal principle of the *noyautistes* that they always hold their meetings prior to those of their respective organizations, so that the program of the revolutionists may be clear-cut and their tactics unified.

The Revolutionary Syndicalist Committee is one

of the most remarkable and advanced types of organization yet produced by the labor movement of the world. Bodies similar to it may be expected to develop soon in all the capitalist countries now that the revolutionary elements are recovering from their childish dual unionism and are seriously mapping out the fight against conservative labor leadership.

As things now stand the force seems pretty well divided between the two factions—at the Lille Congress in July, 1921 the conservatives polled 1,556 votes, while the revolutionists got 1,348. In reality, however, the revolutionists have probably the better of it. They have the more active elements on their side, but the conservatives, through control of the C. G. T. machinery, are able to muster up many phantom organizations to swell their own vote.

Yellow Labor Leadership

Before hazarding an opinion as to the outcome of this bitter fight, it may be profitable for us to trace its origin and course. Previous to the world war the C. G. T. was controlled by the revolutionists, having been captured by them from the conservatives a number of years before. But during the war many of its leaders joined hands with the bourgeoisie and gave the organization a yellow hue. Jôuhaux, Dumoulin and Merrheim, all former left-wing militants, led in this work of reaction.

Returning from the great struggle, the revolutionists took sharp exception to the tactics of their erstwhile comrades and began to organize themselves in minority committees. Pierre Monatte, editor of *La Vie Ouvrière*, headed the revolt. Soon the rebels made their influence felt, and in the great railway strike of May, 1920 they took a very prominent part. The conservatives sabotaged this supreme effort of the workers and then blamed the revolutionists for the terrible defeat. Under the cover of the brutal Government repression and the reaction among the workers, they literally scourged them, driving them out of office in many cases in a manner hardly equalled even in American trade union history.

These events produced a profound crisis in the ranks of the revolutionists. Shocked and enraged at the white guard tactics of the conservative leaders, many of them were for quitting the old unions altogether and starting a new labor movement a la I. W. W. But the seasoned French militants were not caught in such a folly. With the conservatives so desperately anxious to get them out of the unions

they were not foolish enough to leave of their own accord. It is only in the infantile American revolutionary movement that such stupidities are committed. On the contrary, they redoubled their efforts to perfect their minority organizations, having by twenty years of experience learned the potency of such methods.

The Struggle Within the Unions

By the C. G. T. Congress in Orleans, 1920, the revolutionists had succeeded in winning to their side 658 votes against 1,485 of their opponents. But as their strength grew the conservatives intensified the war against them. Their program was to get the revolutionists out of the unions at all costs, and seeing that the latter were not prepared to quit of their own accord they decided to throw them out. Upon the motion of Dumoulin, a former revolutionist, the Executive Committee of the C. G. T. recommended to its affiliated national unions and central labor councils to expell all their local unions that were affiliated with the Revolutionary Syndicalist Committee.

Being keen labor tacticians, the revolutionists were quick to grasp the advantages this gave them. They instantly launched a great campaign to preserve the unity of the labor movement, blasting the conservatives as disruptionists, while American revolutionists have made the cardinal mistake of leaving the conservatives in the position of defending Labor's unity, while they took upon themselves the fatal onus of disruptionism. The effect was magical. The C. G. T., even though it secured a special endorsement from the Amsterdam International, did not dare enforce its famous exclusion order. Only five local unions were expelled by their national bodies—of these two by the Agricultural Workers and three by the Sanitary Employee's Union, and the revolutionists raised such a protest over these cases that the conservatives reinstated the expelled unions rather than accept the certain defeat that would have been theirs had the question come squarely before the Lille Congress. All told, the exclusion policy resulted in a great victory for the rebels.

So anxious are the conservatives to get rid of the revolutionists that they are frankly willing to split the trade union movement in order to do it. All they want is a favorable opportunity, one that will have the masses on their side and the revolutionists in some little-I. W. of their own. They openly declare in their papers that they lost such a chance at the Orleans Congress, and they intimated that the same mistake would not be made at Lille. At this historic gathering they overlooked no occasion to drive the revolutionists into secession, employing tactics that ranged all the way from violations of the constitution to the use of gunmen.

But if the conservatives were anxious to drive the revolutionists out, the latter were just as anxious to stay in. Once in the heat of the battle a group of them left the hall, but they soon perceived their error and returned. It may be set down as a certainty that if there is a split in the French movement the conservatives will have to bear the fatal burden of responsibility.

The Drift Toward Moscow

The congress marked a great victory for the revolutionists. Their vote advanced from 658 to 1,348 in one year, an increase of over 100%. And the victory is moral as well as numerical, for it shows clearly which way the wind is blowing in the French labor movement.

What the future holds is problematical. The conservatives are so badly discredited that they will probably go down fighting, risking their all on some desperate venture. Indeed since the Lille congress they have already shown this inclination. They have re-expelled the famous five locals and violated the mandates of the congress in various ways. They have also supported the pretensions of the atrocious Bidegaray, who is openly trying to demolish the railwaymen's union.

One thing is certain, however, and that is, the revolutionists no longer have serious fear of the long-threatened split. They now have the ear of the masses, and if a division must come, they are sure that the great bulk of the workers will stick with them, leaving the conservatives only a few rags. The most serious menace that confronts them is the danger of a break-up in their revolutionary bloc, because of the growing quarrel between the communists and the syndicalists over the parts to be played by the trade unions and the political party in the revolutionary struggle. But there will doubtless be enough statesmanship in Paris and Moscow to prevent these theoretical differences from wrecking the wonderful movement now being organized by the French militants. Jouhaux and the others who are working to stop the growth of radicalism in the unions will be disappointed in their hope of division in the rebel forces.

In my opinion the conservatives have two general courses open to them: first, they can engineer a split and force the masses to go with the revolutionists; or second, they can go along as they are and be voted out of power in the near future. Unless all signs fail, the revolutionists are certain to recapture the C. G. T. Then we may look for it to renew its youth and regain much of the ground it has lost in the past two years.

When will American revolutionists learn to defend their principles among the organized workers with the skill and courage of the French militants?