

# THE LABOR HERALD

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## The Needle, Shoe and Leather, Textile, and Eastern District Conferences

By Wm. Z. Foster

### THE NEEDLE TRADES CONFERENCE

WHEN the Needle Trades Section of the T. U. E. L. met in national conference in New York City, May 5-6, it was the first time in American labor history that the rank and file elements of all the trades in this industry came together to consider their problems upon an industrial basis. Every important needle trade center in the United States and Canada was represented; likewise every trade in the industry except the United Garment Workers. Some ninety delegates were in attendance, coming almost entirely from local leagues. Had the representation been based upon local unions a conference three or four times as large could have been had.

From beginning to end the conference was crowded with work. Little time was wasted in useless argument or bickering. Phil. Aronberg of Chicago was chairman. The conference opened by hearing a series of reports. Joseph Manley, Eastern District organizer of the League, reported on the formation of the National Needle Trades Section and the calling of the conference. Secretary Foster outlined the national situation generally, and urged that amalgamation be pushed through to victory in the near future. After him came Ida Rothstein who reported on her recent organizing trip for the National Needle Trades Committee. She told of conditions as she found them in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Louisville, Indianapolis, Chicago, Cleveland, Buffalo, Toronto, Rochester, Montreal, Boston, and New York. She stated that practically the entire industry outside of New York is strong for amalgamation and that everywhere the left wing is growing in power and organization. Then Joseph Zack, Secretary of the Needle Trades Section reported in detail on the condition of the unions, the state of the industry, and the growth of the left wing movement among the needle trades. He outlined a program of militant action to solve the growing problems of organizing the unorganized, the piece-work, contractor, and standard of production systems, the growth of "open shop" sentiment among the employers, etc.

Finally Rose Wortis, delegate of the T. U. E. L. to the 2nd Congress of the Red International of Labor Unions, reported on the action of that body. She laid particular stress upon the two great international problems of securing a united front on the industrial field, as against the disruptive tactics of the Amsterdammers, and the establishing of such relations with the Communist International as would bring all revolutionary elements into the Red International. She emphasized the need of a militant international of clothing workers throughout the world.

The conference transacted a vast mass of business covering a wide range of subjects. An elaborate organization thesis was adopted providing detailed plans to organize the local needle trades leagues, care being exercised to follow the natural groupings and tendencies of the unions themselves. The *Freiheit*, New York daily labor paper, was endorsed and its stand in the recent slugging cases in the Furriers' Union was commended. A rousing endorsement was given the Russian revolution. Support was given to efforts of the Russian unions to secure admission to the various international federations of the respective industries. The conference voted to affiliate to the International Clothing Workers Propaganda Committee of the R. I. L. U., and to send a greeting to the revolutionary needle trades workers of the world. All needle trades local unions were urged to become affiliated with their local central labor councils and to become active in them. The famous "Chicago resolution" on amalgamation of all the craft unions into industrial organizations was adopted unanimously. Independent working class political action was endorsed and all militants urged to have their locals and internationals represented at the July 3rd conference called by the Farmer-Labor Party. The Friends of Soviet Russia, the Labor Defense Council, and the Russian-American Industrial Corporation were all supported. The general needle trades program adopted at the first national conference of the T. U. E. L. was re-

affirmed after making slight changes. Plans were laid to put on a big campaign to get readers for the LABOR HERALD and to build up the Sustaining Fund of the League. Efforts will also be made to raise at least \$10,000, through entertainments, donations, etc., to carry on the work of the Needle Trades Section. As soon as possible a bulletin will be published in several languages. During the coming year plans will be prosecuted to complete a system of shop delegate organization and to popularize same among the rank and file of all unions. A program of action was adopted offering practical advice for working among the masses. It follows in part:

We must attract to the League workers who accept our program in whole or in part and regardless of their political views. We must guard however, against mere anti-administration men and aimless kickers. Such elements are a discredit to the League. The character of our members must be irreproachable as judged by our conceptions of loyal unionists.

Our campaigns in the unions must be based upon real concrete issues which effect the interests of the workers in their daily struggle. The criticism of union officials and policies must always be of a constructive nature. We should stress issues rather than personalities.

We should not criticize and foster mistrust against paid officials just because they are officials. Such practice discourages and makes it repugnant for some of our best union members to accept positions as paid officials, thus permitting the job-hunters to manage and control the affairs of the unions.

We must always strike to bring our views before the members through the official union channels. Extra union means should only be made use of as a last resort.

Our principles alone are not sufficient to win the confidence and following of the workers. We must prove to them that we are ready to participate in the daily routine of the unions, and that we feel a greater responsibility to the membership than do the old reactionaries.

We must not make our campaigns on issues, policies, or promises that we know will be impossible of fulfillment if we are elected.

Antagonizing our adversaries on petty matters does not serve the best interests of our movement.

Differences of political opinion must not hamper our co-operation with other groups in union activities.

Although the conference was fruitful in other important matters, amalgamation was by far the biggest issue. No matter what subject was under debate it would almost surely crop up. This was because, whether the question was one of organizing the unorganized, making new demands on the employers, or whatnot, the conference would eventually get around to the basic conclusions that for the problem to be effectively dealt with the combination of all needle workers into one union is absolutely necessary.

The conference officially endorsed the plan of amalgamation drawn up by the National Committee, and proposed to widely circulate and popularize it. Already the plan has been printed in several languages. As the out of town delegations

reported that their localities were in many cases unanimous in all trades for amalgamation the effect was to stir the New Yorkers to action. They declared they would make the consolidation of the unions a burning issue from now on. After the conference was over they held a mass meeting of several hundred militants of all crafts to start the drive. Hope was expressed that amalgamation would be carried overwhelmingly at the 1924 convention of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and International Ladies Garment Workers, and that the needle workers would be the first to actually accomplish industrial unionism through the League's big campaign.

The conference took a definite stand against the Cap Makers' plan for a Needle Trades Alliance, soon to be acted upon by the various organizations. It was denounced as a cheap substitute for amalgamation and about on a par with the brand of federation advocated by Gompers as far back as 1910. It could in no way serve the purposes of needle workers. The inconsistency was pointed out of needle union leaders, who pose as revolutionists, voting for years in A. F. of L. conventions in support of S. P. resolutions for industrial unionism, and now when the issue is definitely raised in their own industry they prove bitter opponents of amalgamation and come forth with a third rate proposition of federation. The conference, while laying it down as a fundamental that all true unionists will try to make the best of whatever form of organization they find themselves in, whether it be craft unionism, federation, or industrial unionism, decided to make a determined and unceasing fight for amalgamation whether the Cap Makers' plan goes into effect or not. Its attitude towards the general conference of the unions to pass upon that plan was expressed in the following resolution which was unanimously adopted:

Resolved, that needle trades amalgamationists should adopt the following course regarding the coming conference of the international unions to consider the Cap Makers' plan of a Needle Trades Alliance:

1. A definite plan of amalgamation should be presented to the conference, providing for one union for the whole needle industry, subdivided into departments for the basic divisions of the industry, and the organization to have only one executive board, one general convention, and one united front generally.
2. Should the conference fail to adopt this plan then the amalgamationists should demand that their plan, together with the plan of alliance or federation, be submitted to a general referendum vote of all needle trades unions, and if this is refused, to urge the calling of a general convention of all local unions to pass upon the proposition.
3. Should these demands all be denied by the conference, the amalgamationists should insist that any plan of alliance, before being considered adopted, should be referred back to the conventions of the several unions for final decision.

In conclusion the conference protested against the attacks made on our movement by Gompers at the Cap Makers' convention and sent a demand that the writer be given the floor to reply to the arch-reactionary—a demand that was refused. A new National Committee was selected to head the Needle Trades Section for the coming year, consisting of 20 members, 11 from New York and 9 from outside points. Joseph Zack was

elected Secretary later by this committee. Thus came to an end the first national conference of the needle trades revolutionaries. Even the pessimists and knockers had to admit that the gathering was a great success. It laid the foundation for a movement which will soon result in producing a militant union of all needle workers, manned by real fighters, and affiliated to the Red International of Labor Unions.

### THE SHOE AND LEATHER CONFERENCE

The first national conference of the militants in the shoe and leather industry was held in Boston, May 13th. Thirty delegates, and many visitors were present from all the leading shoe and leather centers of the East. Practically all the important unions in the industry were represented. The meeting was called by J. Kassner, Secretary of the International Amalgamation Committee, assisted by Joseph Manley.

The conference showed itself alive to the issues of the day. By a unanimous vote it adopted the Labor Party resolution and pledged itself to do all possible to make the July 3rd convention of the Farmer-Labor Party a success. Support was promised to the various class war prisoners in Michigan, California, Massachusetts, etc. The LABOR HERALD was heartily endorsed, and the League's new campaign of "organize the unorganized" was supported as vitally necessary.

But the big issue of this conference, like that of all the others, was amalgamation. The reports of delegates showed that no industry needs amalgamation more than the shoe and leather workers. They are split into at least twenty separate organizations, all warring against each other. Brother Michael Berry, Secretary of the Amalgamated Shoe Workers, outlined the efforts that have been made recently to consolidate all the independent unions. This movement started out most promisingly, joint conventions of many organizations having been held and plans of amalgamation drawn up. But the weakness of the movement was that it was largely one of officials; the rank and file being little posted. The result was that when the amalgamation movement did not go to suit some of these officials, who were eager to guard their own personal interests, they pulled their organizations out of it. Consequently quarrels, court litigation, and even union scabbery ensued, making a bad situation even worse. Del. Berry had a pocketful of court papers of one kind or another aiming to block his efforts at bringing about amalgamation. The conference condemned the officials of the United Shoe Workers for their un-unionlike conduct in sending their men into the factories in Lynn, Mass., while the Amalgamated Shoe Workers were on strike. The con-

ference also condemned the action of President Bryan of the United Leather Workers' International Union, who is sending excited letters all over the country traducing the work of the amalgamationists.

Various delegates explained the difference between the methods of the Committee to bring about amalgamation and those used in the late ill-fated effort. One vital difference is that the International Committee deems amalgamation not as a policy of officials but of the rank and file. Its aim is to thoroughly acquaint the membership with the principles involved and then to solidly organize them to make their will prevail. With this foundation laid, they can force their officials to come together in spite of all selfish quarrels over jobs in the organization. Another important point is that the International Committee proposes to amalgamate not only the independent unions but the A. F. of L. organizations as well. It holds that no amalgamation can be effective unless it includes all the unions in the industry and establishes a real united front. It dismisses as trivial the objection that the A. F. of L. unions, which were heavily represented at the conference, cannot be won over to amalgamation.

With this conception the conference laid plans for a strong amalgamation campaign throughout the entire shoe and leather industry. An International Committee was selected to have charge of the work, consisting of five members in Boston and one each in the important centers of Brockton, Lynn, Haverhill, Peabody, St. Louis, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Paul, Cincinnati, and Rochester. The existing plan of amalgamation, drawn up recently by the International Committee, was endorsed and a departmentalization committee was appointed to revise and complete it, when it will be spread broadcast throughout the industry. Arrangements were made to form local amalgamation committees in all shoe and leather centers, to consist of representatives of all unions, A. F. of L. and independent. The conference adjourned with all hands enthusiastic for the big drive about to begin for the consolidation of the unions, and the organization of the unorganized.

### THE TEXTILE CONFERENCE

Inasmuch as the amalgamationists are just beginning work in the textile industry, the first national conference of the textile militants, held in New York, May 5th, was considerably smaller than the other conferences. But what it lacked in size it made up in quality. Many well known unionists were present from practically all the important unions in the industry, including the United Textile Workers, Amalgamated Textile Workers, American Federation of Textile Operatives, Amalgamated Knit Goods Workers, Associated Silk Workers, One Big Union of Lawrence and various local textile councils. Nearly all the big textile centers were represented.

Aside from the endorsement of the Labor Party convention in Chicago in July and various other progressive measures, the conference occupied itself principally with the question of amalgamation. It adopted a resolution calling for amalgamation of the craft unions generally throughout

the whole labor movement, and also the specific plan of consolidation for the textile unions as presented by the International Amalgamation Committee in that industry. The situation in the textile industry is just about as complicated as in the shoe and leather industry, with all sorts of unions operating in conflict with each other and the great mass of workers entirely unorganized. The conference discussed the chaotic situation in detail, devising practical methods of amalgamation and feasible means to bring it about. A campaign was outlined and an International Committee, headed by Albert Fleischer of New York, chosen to push it through. Local committees will be set up in all textile centers, consisting of militants of all unions and all trades. Before long the Textile Amalgamation Committee will be a power in straightening out the affairs of textile workers and in organizing this tremendous industry employing over 1,000,000 wage slaves.

### THE EASTERN DISTRICT CONFERENCE

The conference of the Eastern District of the Trade Union Educational League, held in New York, May 6th, demonstrated beyond question that militant organization is proceeding rapidly throughout the big industrial centers of the East. There were present 160 delegates from 17 cities, ranging from Montreal to Washington and from New York to Pittsburgh. Nearly all important unions, industries, and districts were represented. Representation was based upon local leagues. Enthusiasm was rife among the delegates.

Tim Buck, of Toronto, made a splendid report on the progress of revolutionary activities in Canada, showing how whole sections of the movement in that country are declaring for the most important planks in the League's platform. Joseph Manley, Eastern District organizer, explained the strides being made in the District. He related, among other important matters, how the militants had just prevented a disastrous split among the hard coal miners over the question of re-organizing the language and town locals into colliery locals. Wm. Z. Foster reported on the general growth of the League, the building up of national committees in nearly all important industries, and stressed the necessity of pushing the fight for union progress in the big centers of the East.

The Conference was clear-cut and revolutionary. It adopted many resolutions supporting the various aspects of the League's work, such as: affiliation to the R. I. L. U., amalgamation, the labor party, defense of the Michigan and other class war prisoners—Mooney, Dolla, Sacco, Vanzetti, etc., Russian-American Industrial Corporation, Friends of Soviet Russia, recruitment of

Negro workers into the trade unions, etc. The newly-formed Marine Workers' Amalgamation Committee introduced a resolution, which was unanimously adopted, sharply condemning Andrew Fureseth, President of the Seamen's Union, for his co-operation with the Department of Justice in its "red" hunt. The National Committees in the Food, Metal, Building, and Marine industries sent letters requesting the assistance of the delegates in setting up Eastern branches of their committees and in generally furthering their programs.

The high light of the conference was the launching of a great drive to organize the unorganized. In a ringing resolution that drastically scored the general officers of the A. F. of L. for their indifference and incompetence, the conference decided to take advantage of the present favorable industrial situation by stirring up the unions everywhere to put on big organization campaigns. This resolution was referred to the National Conference of the League so that this issue can be developed nationally on a large scale. The conference pledged its support to the LABOR HERALD and called upon all local Leagues to push the Sustaining Fund by taking up individual subscriptions, organizing entertainments, etc. At the conclusion a District Executive Committee was elected, with Joseph Manley as secretary, consisting of five members from New York and one each from 21 other important industrial centers in the District. Pronouncing the first conference of the Eastern District a huge success, the delegates departed to their respective localities to push the League's program more vigorously than ever.