

AMERICA'S STEEL-WORKERS

By William Z. Foster

David Brody's *Steelworkers in America: The Non-union Era* is a study of the steel industry, down to the end of the Great Steel Strike of 1919. Printed by Harvard University Press (\$5.00), it is a study in class collaboration. It is primarily an attempt to gloss over the destructive role in the strike played by the steel manufacturers, the government, and by the top leaders of the AFL. The author, obviously, takes great care not to offend any of these three elements in portraying the desperate conditions under which the strike was fought.

Mr. Brody, after his fashion, has produced an elaborately documented book, but its value as accurate labor history is more than doubtful. He handles the brutal steel companies with kid gloves. Actually, their seven-day work week, twelve-hour work day, and their generally abominable conditions were hell-like and murderous, but he glosses it all over and makes it look natural and not so shocking. The frightful conditions were due, he says, to the extreme competition prevailing in the industry. This was not true; it was primarily the profit-hunger of the steel bosses. Mr. Brody treats the government officials, of all categories, who were lickspittle agents of the steel barons in 1919, as so many well-meaning individuals. No stress, for example, is put upon their complete suppression of the rights of free speech and assembly, the wholesale clubbings, arrests, and shootings of the steel workers (22 strikers were killed by the vicious police). Brody is much too polite to mention these unpleasant things, much less blame them upon

their instigators, the steel bosses. And the steel-state governors, and even the President of the United States (Wilson), took no active steps to preserve the strike rights of the workers.

Mr. Brody outdoes himself, however, in covering up the shabby records of the AFL leaders in the steel strike. The author paints the top officialdom as just itching to organize the steel workers. The reality was, however, that they had already agreed before our campaign had begun, not to organize the open-shop industries, of which steel was number one. They also had no plan of work, else, how did they give a comparatively unknown rank and filer like myself the task of leading the organizing campaign? They gave the campaign hardly any money to work with.

How, then, did we organize such a huge strike, with so many basic factors against us? The labor shortage caused by the war, upon which Brody hangs everything, was not enough to do it. Mr. Brody himself marvels at our success. He says, ". . . the . . . conservative Iron Age figure indicates the astonishing dimensions of the strike for union" (p. 242). 367,000 workers struck. (U.S. Dept. of Labor statistics.) He must have known that the top trade union leaders were all set to go through the rapidly-ending war without even trying to organize the steel industry. The fact is that in this great campaign, with the leaders never moving on the job, we were able to apply some principles of Lenin, about whom we personally knew almost nothing as yet. It was just as the Communist Party

was being formed under terroristic conditions.

The first Leninist principle we were able to employ in some degree was the indomitable spirit of carrying out the great job of organizing we had begun, in spite of all obstacles. This infused us with a fighting spirit that was quite foreign to the AFL leadership, and which served us in good stead on many occasions.

The second Leninist feature of our campaign was the thorough planning on which we based all our work. We were industrial unionists and we organized on the idea of one union in the whole industry; a simultaneous campaign in all the steel centers; and we fought to win the organization campaign while World War I was still on—all of which tactics were foreign to the trade-union leaders who were mostly interested in craft unionism and in winning the war. In fact, Gompers called a meeting on March 12, 1917 (even before we got into the war) to formulate labor's position on the war.

Our third Leninist principle was that of self-criticism. That is, in the case of failure in our organizing work—and these were very many and baffling—we, believing implicitly in the possibility of organizing the steel workers, turned our criticism in and against ourselves, not blaming the steel workers, and taking full responsibility for any mistakes, which was contrary to AFL practice—especially of the leaders.

Our fourth Leninist principle was that of the united front. The organizing committee was essentially a combination of two groups—the Left wing (mostly Communists, Socialists, etc.) and the progressives (John Fitzpatrick

and his national following). This combination, which was more or less in opposition to the Gompers' leadership, was indispensable. It carried the campaign through in spite of every difficulty. The conservative leadership, although opposing the campaign, was unable to destroy it outright. This combination of Left-wing and progressives carried through the organizing campaign and the great strike. The united front tactic is still valid today.

Altogether, by the application of our organization principles, which are essentially some of those of Lenin—although as of that time we had hardly learned of him—we carried through the steel campaign successfully. Mr. Brody's estimates, particularly of the organization campaign and the strike, which serve only to whitewash the steel companies, the government, and the conservative trade-union leaders, do not in any vital sense explain the forces that led in the organization campaign and the steel strike.

The Great Steel Strike was formally lost. There was no agreement secured and the union was broken in the strike. Great numbers of workers lost their savings and many had no jobs to return to. On the other hand, the strike won many things for the steel workers. The twelve-hour day and seven-day week were smashed and considerable wage increases were secured. The Great Strike had proved that the steel workers could be organized, in spite of all the steel-trust terror. The 1919 steel strike was the direct forerunner of the C.I.O., formed in November, 1935, under the leadership of John L. Lewis and also of the United Steelworkers, formed in June, 1936 under the leadership of Philip Murray.