

THE LEFT WING IN THE AMERICAN LABOUR MOVEMENT

By WM. Z. FOSTER

(Secretary of the Trade Union Educational League)

WITHIN the last year a veritable revolution has taken place in the tactics of American militant unionists, probably as profound as any that has ever occurred in the history of the world's Labour movement. Up until a year or so ago the whole genius of the left-wing tactical programme was to destroy the old conservative trade unions, and to replace them with new, ideally conceived revolutionary organisations laid out according to blue-printed patterns. This destructive, dualistic attitude dominated our radical and revolutionary unionists to an extent hardly conceivable by those outside of the United States. But now all is changed. With wonderful rapidity the revolutionary elements, to a very large extent, have become convinced that the policy of dual unionism is futile, and they are turning their attention to the organisation of revolutionary nuclei within the old trade unions for the purpose of transforming them into militant organisations. This new movement is crystallising into the Trade Union Educational League. In order to understand this tactical right-about-face, and the factors leading up to it, it will be well for us to review briefly the historical course of the left-wing movement in American Labour unionism.

Despite the glaring backwardness of the American Labour movement, the workers of this country are notably militant in their struggles with capitalism. This is particularly fitting, because American capitalism is not only the most highly developed, but also the most aggressive in the entire world, and naturally provokes a militant reaction on the part of the workers. From the earliest days our Labour struggles have been marked by the most extreme bitterness, and violent battles with large lists of dead and wounded are "normal" accompaniments of American strikes. The recent outbreak in the mining fields, notably the battle at Herrin, Illinois, just the other day, where scores were killed, is only a typical incident in our acute Labour war. Thirty or forty years ago

Socialist students, considering the sharpness of the class struggle in America, often believed that this would be the first country to declare for the revolution. And our Labour movement, as if to bear out these hopes, was the most militant in the world. During the middle 'eighties the American trade unions, for militancy and advanced tactics if not for intellectual clearness, unquestionably stood in the forefront of international organised Labour. It was here, in 1886, that the general strike first received application on a large scale, and it was out of our big Labour struggles that International Labour Day, the First of May, was born. In those days both the Knights of Labour and the trade unions were equally militant and active. All indications were that the American Labour unions would be in the vanguard of the final world struggle against capitalism.

But along in the 'nineties the situation began to change and the movement to lose much of its militancy. This condition has continued until now we find that the American Labour movement, despite the natural aggressiveness of our working class and the highly developed state of capitalism, has become perhaps the most backward Labour movement in the world. Much, if not most, of the cause for this condition is to be traced to the profound change in tactics made by the radicals at the time, in the 'nineties, when the degeneration set in. In the militant period of the movement, that is until about 1890, the policy of the revolutionary unionists was to stay in the old organisations and to function there. Although these active spirits were only a handful, they found such fertile soil in the class-embittered American workers that they had no difficulty in stirring them as a movement to aggressive and far-reaching action. But in the 'nineties a new idea developed among the radicals. This was especially advocated by Daniel De Leon, one of the most powerful figures ever produced by the American Labour movement. His position was that if Socialist unions were to be had they must be organised from the beginning with a revolutionary philosophy and structure. He repudiated entirely the old craft unions, and demanded their destruction. His programme "took" with the radical unionists, and for twenty-five years they laboured diligently to put it into effect. Practically the entire left wing became committed to it. Dual industrial unionism developed almost into a religion with American revolutionaries. Anyone who opposed it or said a good word for the old trade unions was looked upon as a renegade and a traitor.

In many ways the revolutionists' policy of dual unionism has tended to destroy the militancy and hinder the development of the American Labour movement. In the first place it has caused the revolutionists to largely waste their efforts, by turning their energies to the building up of all sorts of still-born organisations. Our Labour history is littered with the bones and wreckage of scores of dual revolutionary unions, which absorbed the life work of thousands of our militants, and resulted in no tangible organisation. The Socialist Trades and Labour Alliance, the Industrial Workers of the World, the One Big Union, and the Workers' International Industrial Union are types of general dual unions calculated to replace the whole Labour movement. All of them have been the most dismal kind of dismal failures. Likewise scores, if not hundreds, of dual unions in the various individual industries. To a great extent, for the past generation, American revolutionary unionists have been chasing Utopian rainbows. By their separatist tactics they have practically cancelled themselves as a positive factor in the Labour struggle. The amount of revolutionary energy lost has been prodigious.

But much worse than the direct failure of the revolutionary organisations is the indirect effect that this dual unionism has had upon the trade unions. In them it has dried up the very sources of progress. The Labour world now knows that all life and progress in mass trade unions depends upon the activities of an exceedingly minute minority of militants. These live wires are the heart and soul of every movement. The great harm that dual unionism has done to American Labour organisations is that it has robbed them of the life-giving help of these militants, by pulling the latter out and isolating them in futile Utopian industrial unions. A case in point is the Western Federation of Miners. Twenty-five years ago this was known as one of the most aggressive trade unions in the world. Its tremendous strikes in Colorado and elsewhere, which were marked with open battles against the company, State, and National armed forces, attracted international attention. The explanation of this extreme militancy was that the organisation was dominated by a handful of fighting unionists, Haywood, St. John, and others, who occupied all its strategic points and literally compelled its membership to fight. But this militancy was lost almost overnight, and in a manner unknown to any other Labour movement but ours. It happened thus: the W.F. of M. was one of the organisations that went to form the I.W.W. in 1905, but it withdrew after a year's affiliation.

When it went into the I.W.W. it took its fortified crew of militants with it, but when it went out it left them behind in the I.W.W., as they cast in their fortunes with that organisation. The result was the robbing of the W.F. of M. of its very soul. It was devitalised, and from that day to this its degeneration has proceeded. Now, reduced almost to nothing and ashamed of its militant past, it has even abandoned the glorious name of the Western Federation of Miners and taken on the title of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers. That was the penalty paid by the W.F. of M. for the loss of its live wires through dual unionism.

For thirty years the whole trade union movement has been similarly systematically bled of its livest and best elements. The havoc wrought is enormous. The general result is that the old bureaucracies have been left in uncontested control of the trade unions, to do as they liked with them. Naturally enough, they have choked back all progress in the movement. Dual unionism, by constantly breaking up all revolutionary opposition, has been a bulwark of strength to Mr. Gompers and his crew. It has sucked the very life out of the American Labour movement. More than anything else, it is primarily responsible for America's paradoxical situation of having at once the world's most advanced capitalist class and the world's most backward Labour movement. Dual unionism has cursed and ruined American Labour.

Although the overwhelming bulk of the left wing in the American Labour movement was violently in favour of dual unionism for many years, still there was a small minority which favoured working to accomplish revolutionary organisation through the development of the old trade unions. The first tangible sign of this in later years was the organisation of the Syndicalist League of North America in 1912. At the time this organisation was founded the fortunes of the I.W.W. and other dual unions were very low and it made considerable headway. But its progress was definitely halted by the outbreak of the Lawrence strike and several other industrial upheavals led by the I.W.W. These movements rejuvenated the dual union idea and practically killed off the Syndicalist League. About the time when the Syndicalist League was most active Tom Mann visited the United States. He told American revolutionaries that their places were in the old organisations. But he was a prophet speaking in the wilderness. The bitter lessons of dual unionism were still to be learned.

The next important move to organise the revolutionary minority in the trade unions took place in 1916. The organisation was called the International Trade Union Educational League. This was comparatively short-lived. Groups were established in many industries and localities, but soon afterward the United States went into the Great War and the movement died out. The mass of the revolutionary unionists were still altogether loyal to the historic American policy of dual unionism.

The latest attempt to draw together the rebel elements in the old craft unions was launched in November, 1920, by the organisation of the Trade Union Educational League. To begin with, this body met with the same indifference as its predecessors, the S.L. of N.A. and the I.T.U.E.L. For the first year of its life it amounted to little or nothing, having only a few scattered groups here and there. But of a sudden a most remarkable change took place in the revolutionaries' minds regarding dual unionism. Almost overnight they became convinced of the folly of this policy. For this quick change of front the experience of the Russian revolution is largely responsible. That great upheaval made clear, especially through the writings of Lenin, Radek, and Losovsky, the tremendous power of the militant working among the masses, whether these masses are in the army, the industries, the trade unions, or what not. Like a flash almost, it became evident to the thinking rebels that they had been wasting their own efforts in dual unionism and thus depriving the trade unions of the very source of life. The attitude of the Third International and the Red Trade Union International on dual unionism stimulated their thought and understanding of this matter. Then the Trade Union Educational League took on remarkable vitality. As we write practically the whole revolutionary union movement, except the die-hards in the I.W.W., W.I.I.U., &c., is swinging rapidly into it. Unless all signs fail, the American revolutionaries, extremists like everything else American, will soon be as violently against dual unionism as they were in favour of it a year ago. Quite evidently our movement is going to make a determined experiment with the long-condemned tactics of working within the old trade unions.

The Trade Union Educational League is founded upon the general principle of establishing nuclei, or *noyaux*, of revolutionaries in all branches and stages of the trade union movement, starting with the

local unions and mounting upwards to the national conventions. By locality the unit of the organisation is the Local General Groups. These bodies are made up of members of all trade unions in given districts, shadowing so to speak the respective Central Labour Councils. The Local General Groups are divided into industrial sections, one for each of the principal industries, such as coal-mining, railroading, general transport, building, printing, clothing, &c. Nationally the industrial section idea also obtains. All the rebel elements in the various craft unions of a given industry are combined into a national section of that industry, which has a secretary to look after its business. The combined secretaries of the educational groups in the national industrial sections make up the Executive Board of the Trade Union Educational League. In the near future it is expected that district organisations, such as Eastern, Central, Western, and Canadian, will be set up to facilitate the co-operation of the militants in the various organisations. The official organ is the *Labour Herald*, published in Chicago, where the headquarters of the League is located. The T.U.E.L. charges no dues to its members, neither does it allow Labour unions to affiliate to it. These precautions are to protect it from the charge of being a dual union. The membership is purely upon a voluntary and individual basis. The first national conference of the League will be held in Chicago on August 26-27 of this year.

The Trade Union Educational League is organising the left bloc in the trade unions on the basis of a few general revolutionary principles. Among these, one of importance is the development of industrial unionism through the amalgamation of the existing trade unions. Another is the abolition of the prevailing trade union political policy of "rewarding Labour's friends and punishing its enemies" and the substitution therefor of a militant working-class political party and programme. In addition, it is working diligently for the affiliation of the American Labour movement to the Red Trade Union International. And finally, it aims at educating the workers to the futility of hoping for any relief through the capitalist system, and turning their energies toward the establishment of a workers' republic.

The League has branches in all large cities and districts of the United States and Canada. In every important Labour union in these two countries its workers are to be found carrying on a militant campaign for transforming the antiquated trade union movement into a virile

revolutionary organisation. Just now it is making a particularly live issue of amalgamation. Hundreds of local unions, dozens of central labour councils, and several national unions have been won over to the general plan of amalgamating the existing craft unions into industrial organisations. The League is everywhere meeting with strong resistance from the reactionaries. Mr. Gompers has denounced it time and again through the official organ of the A.F. of L. and the capitalist papers generally. The presidents of most of the national unions, together with others of their executive officers, are going up and down the country attacking the League, while their official journals teem with slanders against it and misrepresentations of its policies and purposes. Never for thirty years past has the trade union movement of the United States been so stirred by radical activities as it is at the present time.

For the Trade Union Educational League the future is full of promise. The old trade union bureaucracy is intellectually dead and spiritually bankrupt. Absolutely no progress may be looked for from that source. The dead hand of Mr. Gompers holds the old officialdom securely in an icy grasp. He will not tolerate even the mildest progressivism on their part. And as for the Socialist minority, which was very strong in recent years, it has practically disappeared, due to the havoc wrought in its ranks by the war and the left-wing split-offs from the party. What little there is left of it is sadly degenerated—at the recent convention of the A.F. of L. in Cincinnati the pitiful spectacle was seen of the so-called Socialist unions of Ladies' Garment Workers, Fur Workers, and Jewellery Workers voting for every plank in Mr. Gompers's reactionary platform, and against industrial unionism, recognition of Soviet Russia, progressive candidates for the Executive Council, &c. For this treason Mr. Schlesinger, head of the Ladies' Garment Workers, was elected fraternal delegate to the British Trades Union Congress. In the American trade union movement there is no other organised source of progress except the Trade Union Educational League. It is the sole refuge of the dynamic spirits in our Labour organisations, the one ray of hope in an otherwise dismal situation of black reaction. Beyond question it will exert a tremendous influence during the next few years in shaping the course for American Labour.