

Foster Points Out Lessons of Great 1919 Steel Strike

(The Daily Worker today publishes the first of a series of articles by William Z. Foster, chairman of the Communist Party and leader of the 1919 steel strike, on the problems confronting the steel workers in 1936. The second article will be published Wednesday.)

By WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

Article I

THE 1919 steel organizing campaign, as I have already pointed out, faced in many respects much greater difficulties than does the present campaign under the Committee for Industrial Organization, led by John L. Lewis.

The A. F. of L. top leadership ignored the 1919 campaign when they did not sabotage it outright, although the movement was officially conducted under A. F. of L.

auspices. The heads of most of the 24 cooperating organizations took a similar stand. The movement had no strong union backing. Consequently, it was starved from beginning to end for want of men and money, and the organizers on the job were thrown largely upon their own resources.

No Industrial Union Then

Besides this, the 1919 movement was handicapped badly by being carried out on the basis of a federation of many crafts instead of one industrial union. There was



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also no strong Communist Party to help mobilize the fighting workers in the campaign. These facts, taken in connection with the unfavorable economic and political situation at the time, the ruthless terrorism practiced by the steel trust, the great language difficulties then existing, etc., made the work of organization extremely difficult. There was little or no confidence in the ranks of labor generally that the steel industry could be organized.

In spite of all these obstacles and the prevailing pessimism, however, we succeeded in organizing the bulk of the steel workers and in conducting a three and one-half months strike of 365,000 workers in the heart of the steel industry.

How, then, was this accomplished?

The answer was to be found primarily in the application of a few sound principles in the composition, theories and methods of the organizing forces. The C.I.O., in the present campaign, is going up against a very stiff fight and it will do well to learn whatever lessons the big 1919 struggle has to teach it. Let us, therefore, point out a few of the more salient and important of these lessons.

A.—A Progressive Movement

One of the elementary reasons for the success of the 1919 organizers in mobilizing the great masses of the steel workers for struggle against the steel trust was the progressive character of the movement. This progressivism explains (even as it does in the case of the C.I.O. now) why the 1919 organizers began in the first place, for never have the Right reactionaries of the A. F. of L. undertaken such a big and serious job of organization in the union.

In a general sense, the forces that organized the steel workers in 1919 were similar to the present C.I.O.—that is, they constituted a progressive opposition movement in the A. F. of L., and did their organization work in the face of a growing sabotage by the reactionary right-wing controlling the A. F. of L. In this connection there were two important differences, however, between the organizing forces then and now: First, the organizers of 1919 were far less strongly entrenched in the trade unions than are the present C.I.O. leaders; and secondly, the 1919 organizers were considerably more to the left than is the C.I.O.

The 1919 Organizers

The campaign of 1919 was carried through on the basis of a partial united front between the progressive and left-wing forces in the A. F. of L. John Fitzpatrick, Chairman of the National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers, was the head of the National Farmer-Labor Party. As for myself, the Secretary of the National Committee, I was a Syndicalist.

Gradually, the progressive and left forces in the A. F. of L. generally tended to rally around the steel committee. It was no accident, therefore, that the three Socialist-led, needle trade unions (Amalgamated Clothing Workers, International Ladies' Garment Workers Union and Furriers) contributed between them almost twice as much cash as was given by all the 24 cooperating unions together. Had the steel strike been successful, one of its major consequences certainly would have been the overthrow of the Samuel Gompers regime in the A. F. of L. by the gathering progressive, left forces.

Naturally, the 1919 National Committee leaders chose, as far as possible, progressives and lefts to lead the organization work. For example, the General Organizer, J. G. Brown, was a prominent F.-L.P. leader and later became national secretary of that party; Joe Manley, an iron worker and key man in the work, and S. T. Hammersmark, a leading Youngstown organizer, were Syndicalists and later became Communists. J. Olchon, E. Gunther, J. Gent, F. Smith, and various other organizers were left Socialists. Besides, there were dozens of progressives of different shades and many other militant union types. Also the honest, conservative organizers who became attached to the Committee, soon took on a decidedly progressive character. Into such an organizing committee the old veteran fighter, Mother Jones, fitted easily and naturally. The customary chair-warming, hotel-sitting A. F. of L. type of organizers were few and they found anything but a congenial atmosphere among the working organizers.

It was such an organizing crew, made up of revolutionaries, progressives and union militants that carried the

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1919 battle to the steel trust. Dauntlessly these organizers faced the steel trust terror, overcame the heart-breaking lack of support and the actual sabotage by A. F. of L. leaders, solved the many complicated problems arising in the organizing work, and finally organized the steel workers in spite of all opposition. They realized the vast significance of the work they were in, and they knew that in the broad steel movement, extending from the men who dug the iron ore and transported it on to the workers in the mills and the Great Lakes, to those who delivered the finished steel products to the railroad workers on the main lines, that they were blazing the way for industrial unionism in the A. F. of L. Without such a militant fighting crew of organizers, the organization of the steel workers in 1919 never could have been accomplished.

For the C.I.O. organizers the lesson of all this should be plain enough. They have had much practical experience in real battles against the employers all over the country and they know, therefore, that organizing the steel industry is no pink tea party. The C.I.O. leaders would make no mistake in selecting as organizers the most aggressive, intelligent and active among the steel workers and related industries, and put them into the active work. The best fighters will be found almost invariably to be of a left-wing persuasion politically; that is, Farmer-Laborites, Socialists and Communists.

B.—A Democratic Movement

Another basic cause of the success in organizing such great masses of steel workers in 1919 was the fact that the organizers aimed to secure the widest possible participation of the workers themselves in the actual building of the unions. The whole movement was based upon a broad trade union democracy. This democracy was developed, of course, not in accordance with plans of the A. F. of L. leaders, but despite them. It originated through the initiative of the organizers who had the work directly in hand.

In order to base the organization movement solidly upon rank and file participation, a whole series of organizations and activities were developed. Thus, local steel councils were set up in all the principal steel centers and they sometimes had as many as 200 delegates; they actively led the local work and locked all the various unions firmly together in the steel towns. There were also local committees in the steel centers made up of representatives of non-steel industry unions that were cooperating with the general drive. In addition, there were frequent meetings of the local steel organizers, scores of whom came directly from the ranks of the local workers themselves.

Democratic Practices Evoked Enthusiasm

All these devices tended to draw the masses directly into the work and to call forth their latent leadership, energies and enthusiasm. The same democratic principle was also applied on a national scale. Thus, for example, a large rank and file conference of steel workers from all parts of the industry was held in Pittsburgh, attended by several hundred delegates, to unify the organization work nationally, to lay the basis for demands upon the bosses, to consider questions of strategy, etc. This national conference vastly strengthened the whole campaign. Similarly, on the eve of the strike, a national strike vote was taken, a step which enormously enthused the workers and intensified their direct participation in the movement.

The committee that led the 1919 general movement, the National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers, also had considerably a rank and file character. On paper it consisted of 24 presidents of the cooperating industrial unions in the campaign, but in reality these big officials sabotaged it and very few attended its meetings. Hence its gatherings consisted principally of the field organizers, who mapped out the practical work and in many instances came into sharp conflict on questions of policy with the reactionary top leaders of the A. F. of L. and the 24 cooperating unions.

The general effect of thus systematically democratizing the movement was to sink its roots deeply among the masses and to win their enthusiastic support. It enabled the movement largely to overcome the acute lack of resources and lack of solidarity caused by the criminal failure of the A. F. of L. and union leaders generally to support the campaign. Thus, consciously applied, trade union democracy was one of the "secrets" of the great vitality and fighting spirit of the 1919 movement.

Tendency Towards Over-Centralization

In the present campaign to organize the steel industry, the C.I.O. organizers would do well to pay close attention to the lessons of trade union democracy that the 1919 strike has to teach. This is all the more necessary because one of the weaknesses of the C.I.O. leadership is a lack of practice of trade union democracy in their unions.

There is also present a tendency toward over-centralization in the leadership of the steel drive and it should be corrected. A whole series of rank and file committees, activities, etc., should be developed, which will actually draw in large masses of workers as practical organizers. The local committees and organizers should be linked up with the national directing committee. Such measures would increase the workers' confidence in the movement and would enable them to utilize their boundless energy and militancy for its upbuilding.

The need for trade union democracy in organizing the steel workers is one of the clear lessons of 1919 which must not be ignored.

(The second article will be published on Wednesday)