

Foster Says Steel Labor Must Rely On Own Strength

Urges Accepting Aid of All Friendly Groups, But Warns Against Dependence on Capitalist Politicians to Advance Drive

In the opening sentence of Comrade Foster's Article II there occurred a typographical error which seriously changed the sense of the article. The sentence should have read: "Another fundamental reason why the organizers of 1919, in the face of stupendous difficulties, were ABLE to mobilize such great masses of steel workers, etc." The error was to make the sentence read UNABLE, instead of ABLE.

By William Z. Foster
Article III.

E.—A Fighting Movement

A great source of strength in the 1919 campaign to organize the steel workers was the fact that the organizers never lost sight of the elementary consideration that the steel workers had to depend primarily upon their own economic power, their ability to strike the industry, in order to defeat the Steel Trust. They did not rely on the government to advance their cause or allow their movement to become a tail to the political kite of capitalist politicians. Hence, their movement remained healthy and was not misled into the many political traps that beset its path.

Of course, the 1919 organizers utilized so far as was practical every political institution and connection. They defended themselves in the courts, protested against the lawlessness of the Steel Trust and demanded that the workers' rights be protected by government officials. They sent a delegation to President Wilson urging upon him to call a conference with the Steel Trust. They worked with many churches, veterans' organizations, fra-

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ternal societies and every other body that showed any disposition of friendliness towards the steel workers.

But (and here is the nub of it) they never depended upon these movements and activities as substitutes for solid union action by the workers themselves. And it was well that they did not, because all such appeals and protests were quite fruitless to secure government action against the Steel Trust. On the contrary, what the steel workers got nationally, state-wide and locally from the Wilson government, so-called friend of labor, in 1919 were injunctions, police, troops, armies of deputy sheriffs, suppression of free speech and assemblage, thousands of workers clubbed, shot and thrown in jail, tricky disruptive maneuvers, etc.

Free Speech Fight

Consider, for example, the line followed in the great free speech fight in Western Pennsylvania. In this great territory, where there were some 200,000 steel workers employed, the Steel Trust, through subservient local politicians, completely suppressed the right of steel workers to assemble in union meetings. There was the anomalous situation created where the S. P., I.W.W. and other left-wing organizations were allowed to meet freely, while the A. F. of L. steel unions were rigidly denied the right to hire halls, meet on the street, or even on their own property. The organizers, of course, protested far and wide against this gross violation of the workers' constitutional rights. They fought it out in the courts, sent delegations to the local mayors and to the governor of Pennsylvania, had a dozen investigators in from the United States Department of Labor (whose report was never published).

All this political activity was correct, but it had only an agitational value. The main reliance was correctly placed upon mass action by the workers themselves. As the organizers went ahead with political protests, they at the same time attacked the free assemblage problem directly by going out to speak on the streets of Monessen, Homestead, McKeesport, Duquesne, Braddock and many other towns in face of the prohibition of all meetings by the local officials. The organizers were repeatedly thrown into jail in this free speech fight. But the steel workers were inspired by their bold example and rallied to the movement in such thousands that everywhere the local city officials decided it was better to lift their free assembly embargo and allow the steel workers to hold meetings in halls. Thus, the steel workers established free speech and free assembly in the Pennsylvania steel districts in the pre-strike period by their own direct actions when all political protests had completely failed.

Wilson's Conference

This policy of the workers depending only upon themselves, received, however, its greatest test just on the eve of the big strike. The strike date had been set for September 22. President Wilson had called a national industrial conference for October 9, which was supposed to establish "harmony between capital and labor." Suddenly, therefore, President Wilson called upon us to "postpone" the steel strike until after his national industrial conference. President Gompers of the A. F. of L. immediately supported Wilson's proposal through a statement in the press, and soon afterward we received telegrams showing that a majority of the presidents of the twenty-four cooperating unions also supported Wilson.

But the organizers on the job were convinced that to attempt to postpone the strike as proposed would be absolutely fatal to the movement. Tens of thousands of workers were walking the streets discharged. Agents of the steel companies among the workers were circulating the story that the whole movement was about to collapse. And in any event there was absolutely no assurance whatever that the October 9 conference would do anything to help the steel workers. To postpone the strike, therefore, would have liquidated the movement altogether. It would have resulted in a violent offensive by the Steel Trust to cut the movement to pieces and a series of futile defensive local strikes by the demoralized workers.

Realizing these facts, therefore, the organizers went ahead with the strike on the date scheduled. It so turned out that the October 9th conference was a complete fiasco and had the steel strike been postponed waiting for it, it would have resulted in the most shameful collapse that labor in this country had ever experienced. As it was, by

striking the steel workers had a fighting chance to win. And they would have won their great strike had they received even a minimum of support from the labor movement generally.

Bitter Fight Seen

During the present campaign it will be well to pay close attention to the lesson of the 1919 steel workers in not depending upon the capitalist politicians to save the workers' cause. It is practically certain that the present organization campaign in the steel industry will not be allowed by the Steel Trust to be carried through to a victorious end without a big and bitterly fought strike. The workers must realize this from the outset. In face of the statement by the Steel Institute and the traditional position of the steel bosses any other conclusion would be folly.

Of course, it is necessary in the present struggle to utilize every government institution possible to protect the steel workers. It will be of enormous advantage if friendly government officials in Pennsylvania maintain the right of assemblage for the steel workers, furnish relief to those of them who are discharged for membership in the union, prevent the murderous use of state troopers and other police forces against the workers, and generally create a favorable public opinion toward the steel movement. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to depend upon capitalist politicians to make a real fight for the organization of the steel workers.

In the huge struggle now developing, we may be sure that the Steel Trust and finance capital generally will exert the heaviest pressure upon every government agency to prevent the organization of the steel workers. It is already certain that they will be able to use the courts to knock out the Wagner Labor Act, to cripple the National Labor Relations Board, and to issue injunctions against the workers.

No Dependence on Roosevelt

Nor can the steel workers put their trust in Roosevelt. Roosevelt is now on the retreat before the attacks of the great capitalists. And he cannot be expected to withstand the heavy capitalist pressure that will be placed upon him and to make the necessary last ditch fight for the organization of the steel workers. On the contrary, Roosevelt is practically certain in the very probable strike crisis to adopt half-way measures or to make some sort of a maneuver that would rob the steel workers of their victory either partly or completely.

That this lack of confidence in Roosevelt is justified was demonstrated by the experience of the steel workers with him in 1934. At that time, with the "Committee of Ten" movement, the workers in the steel industry had got underway a vast strike movement. The whole country was in the midst of a great wave of strikes and had the steel workers struck at this time they would have surely been speedily victorious. It was the best opportunity for victory ever presented to the steel workers in the history of the industry. But the victory was snatched from their hands by a maneuver of the steel barons to which William Green was an accessory, with the approval of Roosevelt. He induced the leaders of the union to turn the whole situation over to a government committee, with the result that the workers' cause was lost and their entire movement completely dissipated. Because the C.I.O. leaders are so closely bound up with Roosevelt politically it is all the more necessary to sound this warning against relying upon him.

From all this experience, in 1919 and later years, it is clear that the steel workers and their labor allies must prepare for a real fight. They, of course, should utilize so far as they can friendly government officials, but under no circumstances should they put their cause in the hands of such people. On the contrary, every preparation must be made for a probable great strike. Especially is it necessary to draw the railroad men into the movement, so that when such a strike is forced by the Steel Trust the mills (and perhaps many other industries) will be tied up completely. Failure of the railroad men to support the 1919 struggle was the final cause of the defeat of the movement. The 1936 campaign must be kept upon a fighting basis and not allowed to slip into the control of designing capitalist politicians. The whole history of the labor movement fairly shouts this elementary lesson.

F.—A Political Movement

Although the steel workers must not surrender their movement in the hands of politicians, this

with the C. I. O., which are driving forward to build big industrial unions to fight against the very evils that Mr. Green cited in his report.

9 Old Men—9 Evils

The A. F. of L. survey shows that the following evils have become more manifest since the voiding of the NRA:

(1) Lengthening of hours; (2) wage-cutting below the minimum rates established by codes; (3) abandonment of overtime rates for overtime work; (4) reduction of wages above the minimum; (5) stretch-out, doubling-up and speed-up; (6) widespread recurrence of child labor; (7) resumption of home labor; (8) elimination of minimum apprenticeship standards; (9) abandonment of old standards of work load, elimination of night work and special labor provisions for women in industry.

On the impotent role of the right wing leadership of the A. F. of L., Foster concluded emphatically: "The right wing of the A. F. of L., represented in 1919 by Gompers and in 1936 by Green, never could or would organize the steel workers. They have never produced either plans or funds then or now. They have never initiated a serious steel campaign. The task of organizing the steel workers in 1919 just as it is in 1936, was the task of the progressive wing of the A. F. of L. and the work now also must be carried through in the face of the sabotage by the right reactionaries, who, by their course of action, always give objective support to the steel bosses. The less Mr. Green has to say about the role of the A. F. of L. general office in the 1919 steel campaign, the better it will be for the honor of the trade union movement."

does no mean in any sense that organized political action is not necessary for them. On the contrary, they have the most urgent need in combination with other workers, to give their movement the highest political character and to utilize it to entrench workers' representatives in all branches of the government. Only when this is done will it be possible to use government forces—courts, police, soldiers, etc.—on the side of the workers. And to accomplish these ends in the only really effective way requires the establishment of the Farmer-Labor Party.

The 1919 strike also has some very valuable lessons to teach regarding such organized political action by the workers. At that time, as well as now, almost universally the steel town governments were in the hands of Steel Trust lackeys. These people played a vital role in suppressing free assemblage, using the police power against the workers, and in generally supporting the Steel Trust terror. They were a real menace and enemy of the steel workers at every step along the road.

A highly instructive exception was in the Wheeling, West Virginia, area, when the Labor Party movement was strong. There the workers before the strike had conducted important independent political action and had captured many key county and city offices. Thus, when the strike came, the workers were in a strategic position. They were able to maintain free assemblage and the right to picket in spite of all the menaces of the steel bosses and of their subservient courts and their armed thugs. And when, for example, it came to appointing deputy sheriffs to maintain public order, the workers' representatives picked them from the ranks of the strikers themselves. The general result was protection for the workers and a stronger strike generally.

The Political Lessons of 1919

The 1919 strike awoke the steel workers politically in many places. In Johnstown, Pa., for example, the workers captured both the Republican and Democratic party machinery and nominated their own candidates for mayor, etc. However, due to their political inexperience and also to the work of provocateurs and disrupters, they were defeated by the bosses who put up an independent ticket. Had not 1919 been an off election year there doubtless would have been many similar local movements in other steel towns making towards the creation of a Labor Party. The need for organized political action by the workers was so evident that I myself, who entered the steel campaign a syndicalist and an opponent of political action, became a member of the Labor Party immediately after the end of the strike.

The C. I. O. should not ignore these vital political lessons of 1919. During the present struggle of the steel workers it will very probably be impossible to develop a national Farmer-Labor Party, or even state Farmer-Labor Parties in steel industry states soon enough to play an important role in the struggle. Nevertheless, very much can be done on a local scale by setting up Farmer-Labor Party and labor tickets in the various steel towns and nearby mining centers during the 1936 elections. Such local parties and movements would be a great source of strength to the present organization campaign and the strike that will almost surely follow it. They would also give a great impulse to the development of a Farmer-Labor Party on a state-wide and national basis.

Not dependence upon capitalist friends of labor, but the organization of a Farmer-Labor Party; this must be the political line of the steel workers. The steel campaign should not only result in organizing huge masses of workers in the various basic industries, but should also be a real starting point for a great mass national Farmer-Labor Party.

(The concluding article in this series will be published next Monday)