

The Lewis-Beck-McDonald Trade Union Pact

By William Z. Foster

ON APRIL 30TH presidents John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers (independent), Dave Beck of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (A.F. of L.), and David J. McDonald of the United Steel Workers (C.I.O.), met at luncheon in Washington, D.C. and worked out an informal program of joint union action which may have far reaching effects upon the future of the whole labor movement. The three highly influential labor leaders spoke in the name of about 3,000,000 workers in the very strategic industries of coal, steel, and transport. The pact bears many of the characteristic earmarks of Lewis' leadership.

At a press conference held later on, with McDonald and Beck present, Lewis stated the purposes of the new pact were threefold: 1) to compel government action to end unemployment; 2) to abandon all efforts to amend the Taft-Hartley law and to insist upon its repeal, and 3) to bring pressure upon the national, state, and municipal legislatures in order to secure remedial legislation for labor. Lewis announced also that although the three big unions had no definite plan as yet, or even a name for their

new cooperative venture, they would in the future work closely together. Periodic meetings, he said, would be held. Other unions were invited to cooperate.

In a television broadcast on May 9th, Lewis further elaborated upon the new union pact. He said it was not designed to draw the U.M.W.A. into either the C.I.O. or A.F. of L., and by implication, neither of the other two participating organizations. It was his opinion that the movement would have greater scope in the near future, but he was not explicit as to just what shape this would take. Highly critical of the leadership of both national federations of labor, Lewis indicated that the bulk of the new movement's political support in the coming election campaign would go to Democratic Party candidates. He spoke neither for nor against a new labor federation.

Apparently the important top-level union conference in Washington was held without prior notice either to the A.F. of L. or the C.I.O. Consequently, there is much speculation in labor's ranks and outside as to just what the new move signifies. However, as the present article is

being written, ten days after the holding of the conference, neither of the two national federations, nor any of their individual leaders, have spoken out as yet, taking a definite stand regarding it.

A BACKGROUND OF WORKER DISCONTENT

Although neither Lewis, Beck, nor McDonald have given a clear outline as to just what their plans are politically and organizationally, it is clear that the new move is full of dynamic possibilities. This is obvious for two basic reasons. The first of these is because in the ranks of the labor movement there is a wide discontent among the working class upon a number of basic issues. The workers are heavily burdened by high prices, high taxes and the current decline in industry, the number of unemployed now being in the neighborhood of five to six million, and they are greatly alarmed at the growing signs of a further increase in joblessness. The Negro workers especially are being hit by unemployment. The steel, coal, and trucking industries are deeply affected by unemployment, Lewis stating that among these are 400,000 totally without work, as well as 300,000 miners and 250,000 steel workers who are working only one to four days per week. Moreover, wage cuts are also beginning in these and other industries.

Together with their unrest over the economic situation, the workers are also greatly alarmed about the growth of reaction, especially Mc-

Carthyite fascism. Far and wide they are shocked at the plague of loyalty tests, Smith and McCarran Act persecutions, and the innumerable other manifestations of thought-control and ideological intimidation that are now to be found on all sides in the United States. All this they see being cultivated by the Eisenhower Administration, which is clearly their enemy. In their trade unions, the workers have felt directly the whiplash of developing reaction in the attempts now being made in Congress to worsen still more the infamous Taft-Hartley law, as well as in the Butler-Miller, Goldwater-Rhodes and Brownell-Ferguson bills, and a whole mess of other national and state anti-labor legislation, lately passed or now pending.

In addition to their discontent over unemployment and growing political reaction, the workers likewise are increasingly fearing the development of the danger of war. They share with the other democratic elements of the American nation—the Negro people, the poor farmers, the lower middle classes—the dread of the A- and H-bombs and an atomic war. In trade unions whose leaders are committed to the war program of American imperialism, the workers do not have much opportunity to express their pro-peace sentiments, but it would be a grave miscalculation to ignore them.

The second fundamental reason creating dynamic possibilities for the Lewis-Beck-McDonald move—in addition to the workers' unrest over unemployment, political reaction, and

war danger—is the fact that the official trade-union leadership has done very little, if anything, to relieve or correct the basic evils that the workers are complaining of. Although the 16,000,000 trade unionists and their friends and allies constitute a majority of the American people, their leaders have been unwilling to make felt the tremendous potential political power of the working class and its allies.

It is a fact, of course, that the leaders of the A.F. of L., the C.I.O., the Railroad Brotherhoods, and the conservative independent unions have worked out various anti-depression programs, but they have not fought for them, especially not upon a joint, united front basis. They have also talked a great deal against the Taft-Hartley law and McCarthyism, but again real fighting action has been lacking. And as for fighting to maintain world peace, perhaps the less said about that the better. For the tragic reality is that by actively supporting the Dulles line of aggressive imperialism and anti-Communist witch-hunting, the major labor leaders have contributed to the war hysteria.

The above are basic reasons why the Lewis-Beck-McDonald union pact could have vast consequences—because the workers, the Negro people, the farmers, and other democratic strata are full of grievances and unrest, and because the official leaders of the labor movement have defaulted in their mass leadership responsibilities. Should the new combination unfold a real fight, as it prom-

ises to do, on behalf of even a few of the grievances of the workers, it would very quickly muster around itself a huge following.

POTENTIALITIES AND DANGERS

It is difficult at this stage to forecast whether or not the new union combination of Lewis, Beck, and McDonald will develop a progressive or a reactionary course. During the 1930's, John L. Lewis, leader of the new pact, was a dynamic force in the labor movement. He gave a splendid lead to the workers in the organization of the trustified industries and the founding of the C.I.O. Since then, however, his course has been erratic and unconstructive politically, mostly within the orbit of the Republican Party. As for Beck and McDonald, they are both in the conservative wing of organized labor, with conservative political connections. Neither has ever given any sign that he could be a leader in a progressive cause.

Under the severe pressures now upon the working class in this country, however, the coal, steel, and trucking unions have displayed recently some evidence of response. Thus, the U.M.W.A. Journal has been calling for the control and abolition of the H-bomb and other atomic weapons. It has also repeatedly fired into Senator McCarthy, and likewise, it has called for vigorous action from the government to protect the workers from the effects of the developing economic crisis. And as for the fight

against the Taft-Hartley law, no A.F. of L. or C.I.O. union has a record equalling that of the U.M.W.A. Both the Teamsters and the Steel Workers have also been demanding anti-depression action from the government, and both of them have been attacking McCarthyism. The Teamsters' *Journal* recently gave a firm endorsement of Bishop Sheil's strong speech in Chicago against McCarthy.

The three leaders, Lewis, Beck, and McDonald, are, of course, outspoken defenders of the capitalist system, and they are also giving support to the aggressive imperialist program of the Eisenhower Administration, misnamed for national defense. All three men are also advocates of the "red menace" line and practitioners of red-baiting. In these facts are the gravest dangers to any movement that they may lead. It is quite possible, of course, to develop a strong movement in behalf of the economic demands of the workers in the crisis and also against the dangerous pest of McCarthyite fascism, and all of this must be actively supported. But organized labor can make no basic steps forward until it breaks with the war program of American imperialism. This is elementary, because in these days domestic policy is largely dependent upon foreign policy; worsened economic conditions and McCarthyism being built-in parts of imperialist foreign policy. A strong movement, however, might begin on economic issues.

The supreme need of the labor

movement at this time is united political action against the economic crisis, against McCarthyism, and against militarism and the war danger. The new union pact, by stressing the need for joint legislative action for a number of elementary demands at least formally endorses this basic worker need. This trend must be strengthened and developed by the action of the masses. If so, it could result in great progress for the labor movement. The new pact can be constructive only if it is a strong force for labor unity.

One thing that must be guarded against, however, is any tendency toward the establishment of a new labor federation. Reaction would hail such a development. Alarms are already going forth from the workers against such a danger, especially in view of Lewis' record of independent unionism and also because of the uneasy position of Beck in the A.F. of L. and of McDonald in the C.I.O. Political cooperation should be developed among all the trade unions, whatever their national affiliations; but a new labor federation is unnecessary, and any attempt to establish one could only prove disastrous by inflicting a bitter organizational struggle upon the labor movement. It would be especially disastrous to try to disintegrate the C.I.O.

SOME LESSONS FROM LABOR HISTORY

The new trade-union pact of Lewis, Beck, and McDonald signalizes an important rift in the

ranks of the top leadership of the labor movement. This in itself is nothing to be surprised at. Because of the undemocratic and unprogressive character of the great bulk of the trade-union leadership, important progressive movements, based upon wide discontent among the rank and file, usually get under way to the accompaniment of sharp divisions among the upper leaders of the trade unions. This was notable in the cases of the two most important forward movements of organized labor during the past generation, namely, the political movement climaxing in the independent presidential candidacy of Robert M. LaFollette in 1924, and the great organizing campaign, beginning in the early 1930's which culminated in the foundation of the C.I.O. and the organization of the basic, trustified industries.

The LaFollette movement, which continued and grew over the period 1917-1924, had as its base the high state of militancy of the workers during the war and during the time of the bitter post-World War I offensive of the employers. It took the two-pronged form of, on the one hand, rank-and-file union organization campaigns and labor party movements and, on the other hand, of a drive for nationalization of the railroads, cultivated by the railroad union chiefs. Leaders in this movement were such figures as Glenn Plumb, John Fitzpatrick, Warren S. Stone, and Sidney Hillman. The Gompers bureaucracy was strongly opposed. At the 1920 A.F. of L. convention in

Montreal, the proponents of the new progressive movement gave Gompers the biggest defeat of his career. After 1924, the movement petered out, mainly because of the return of "prosperity" and the subsidence of the employers' open shop drive.

The great C.I.O. organizing campaign of the 1930's was marked by a still more pronounced split among the top union officialdom. This even led to the division of the union movement into two national camps. Coming out of the bitter hardships of the great economic crisis and inspired by their election of Roosevelt in 1932, the militant working class pressed forward to the accomplishment of the central task then confronting the American labor movement, the organization of the great open-shop industries. The reactionary Gompers (then Green) leadership of the A.F. of L. tried to prevent this mass drive ahead, with the resultant split and the rolling on of the new C.I.O., chiefly under the leadership of John L. Lewis, Sidney Hillman, and Phillip Murray, to the winning of the greatest advance in the history of the American labor movement.

As indicated above, the situation in the trade-union movement is now ripe for another big forward stride. History has shown that the labor movement in this country, instead of steadily advancing simply along evolutionary lines, tends also to advance by periodic broad leaps ahead, an important part of which is the development, under accumulating and irresistible mass pressure, of deep

splits in the ranks of the controlling labor bureaucracy. Since the end of World War II, and especially after the beginning of the Korean war in 1950, rank-and-file resentment and militancy have been rising because of gradually worsening economic conditions, the growth of reaction in the country, and the threatening danger of a devastating atomic world war.

True to their role as agents of the bourgeoisie, the top leaders of the A.F. of L., C.I.O., Railroad Brotherhoods, etc., have failed to give leadership to the working class and its allies in this growing crisis. Characteristically, they have sat on the safety valve until now, under rapidly rising pressures, the boiler has just about reached the bursting point. The new Lewis-Beck-McDonald trade union pact is undoubtedly an expression of this growing working class militancy, struggling for expression under severe bureaucratic trade-union controls. However, whether or not this new split in top union ranks will be able to play the progressive part that its prototypes did in 1924 and 1935 remains to be seen.

THE ROLE OF THE LEFT-PROGRESSIVE FORCES

The possible potential of the Lewis-Beck-McDonald pact will depend very much, if not decisively, upon the attitude taken towards it by the Left and progressive forces. Rank and file pressure, arising from mass discontent, is not enough by itself to realize a great forward movement of the labor movement; nor is the lead-

ership of conservative trade-union officials. An indispensable element is the clear-sightedness, militant spirit, and tireless energy of the broad Left wing. The whole history of the American labor movement goes to illustrate this elementary truth.

This fact was clearly demonstrated in the 1917-1924 political movement, referred to above. The united front alliance between the Workers (Communist) Party and the Chicago Federation of Labor, led by John Fitzpatrick, was a decisive factor in the historic LaFollette movement. This Left-progressive combination built labor and farmer parties directly in many states and cities throughout the country, and it also infused the broad movement with fighting spirit. The split which eventually divorced the Left from the movement in general was an elementary factor in its overall decline.

In the great C.I.O. organizing campaign, a decade later, the Left wing, especially the Communists, was also a decisive and indispensable factor. Without the Left the great industries could not have been organized. This was dramatically illustrated by the complete failure of the C.I.O. drive in the late forties to organize the industries of the South—a fruitless campaign conducted “without the Reds.” Significantly, the C.I.O. has never displayed any vitality since 1949 when, at the behest of the reactionary State Department, it split off the progressive unions—eleven of them, with some 900,000 members—forces which were so decisively important in union-

izing the basic industries, in organizing the masses of Negro workers, and in giving the C.I.O. its undisputed position as the most progressive section of the whole labor movement.

Now comes the test of the Lewis-Beck-McDonald movement. In view of the highly propitious situation among the workers for big strides forward, the Left and progressive forces in the A.F.L., the C.I.O., the Miners, and the progressive independent unions obviously should try to see to it that the new movement achieves its stated objectives, and much more. It is a fact that the broad Left is under heavy fire from the warmongers and witch-hunters of the Eisenhower regime. But it nevertheless possesses great potential strength, which, with a proper program and spirit of resolution, it can bring into effective action. The launching of the new Lewis-Beck-McDonald movement offers it an opportunity to help organized labor achieve major progress.

The move for joint action for common objectives by the trade unions to be constructive, should be developed so as to include all labor organizations.* At the same time, care should be exercised to prevent the movement from being misdirected into an attack against either the C.I.O. or A.F. of L., or towards the formation of a new labor federation. This would be a major step backward. The Lewis-Beck-McDonald pact should bring about more, not

less, trade-union unity. The labor movement is ripe for the broadest united front fight in support of the workers' elementary demands.

The demands of the Lewis-Beck-McDonald movement, as outlined above, are basic and if pushed aggressively could receive the active support of all Left and progressive forces. The C.I.O. and A.F. of L. unemployment programs should be merged. At the same time, the program of the movement should be broadened to include a solid struggle against McCarthyism, for the elementary demands of the Negro people and the farmers, and, eventually also, against the whole war program of American imperialism. Nothing short of this can provide an effective fighting program for the American working class.

The movement should not confine itself merely to fighting immediately for specific issues, important though these are. It should also undertake to give a strong political lead to the workers in the coming national elections this Fall. The bulk of the workers, as well as their Negro and farmer allies, are now generally supporting candidates of the Democratic Party, and any attempt to lead them toward the Republican Party would be disastrous. The Draft Program of the Communist Party clearly outlines the tasks in organizing these forces—to register now for the maximum political effect, to defeat McCarthyism, to oust the Eisenhower regime and to move towards the establishment of a broad labor-farmer party.

* At the recent Amalgamated Clothing Workers convention in Atlantic City, McDonald called for a broad, general political movement of all workers.