

**LABOR'S**

**ANSWER**

**To**

**Conscription**

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# Labor's Answer to Conscription

By FELIX MORROW

The trade union leaders have said "NO!" to the Burke-Wadsworth conscription bill. For the CIO, John L. Lewis informed the House and Senate military affairs committees that "I have carefully canvassed our organizations and find that the concensus of opinion is in fundamental opposition to this measure." William Green had to report likewise on behalf of the AFL; the big five Railroad Brotherhoods took the same stand. Seldom have all three sections of the trade union movement been unanimous as they are on this question. That fact undoubtedly reflects the firm sentiment of the overwhelming majority of their membership.

"No" was not, however, the only answer that the official leadership of the trade unions gave to the conscription bill. A mere "No" could not be the sole element in any answer to conscription. One must also answer the question: "If not the conscription bill, then what?"

The pacifists have no answer to this question. They try to deny that the problem of military training exists—and they do this in a world whose chief characteristics have become militarism and war! Instead they read us sermons about the evils of force and violence and publish a dreary literature to prove that war is not really necessary, that the United States can turn its back on the rest of the world, etc. In the end of course, as happened during the World War in all countries, the pacifist myth is blown apart by the realities of this capitalist world that we live in; and the pacifists turn into rabid recruiting sergeants, who say: "You know me. I was always against war. Therefore if I tell you now that you should support the government in this war, you should believe me."

Like the pacifists, the Communist Party also has no answer to the question: "If not the Burke-Wadsworth bill, then what?" Its propaganda is, indeed, impossible to distinguish from the clap-trap of the pacifists. It consists of belittling the real possibilities of German imperialist penetration of the Western Hemisphere, and of similar arguments borrowed from the "isolationists". Far from helping to win workers to a firm stand against the conscription bill, the propaganda of the Communist Party makes many workers believe that the Stalinist propaganda is merely designed to serve Stalin's friend, Hitler. These workers, despite the Stalinist attacks upon them as "red-baiters", are in reality far in advance of the Communist Party to this extent: they understand that the working class must give an answer to the question: "If not the conscription bill, then what?"

In contrast to the pacifists and Stalinists, the official leaders of the trade unions *have* given an answer to this question. The main purpose of this pamphlet is to demonstrate that their answer is the wrong one; that their "alternative" is no better than the conscription measure and, indeed, paves the way for the enactment of the Burke-Wadsworth bill in the end. After this is demonstrated, we propose what we believe is the right answer to this fundamental question.

### **The Lewis-Green Answer**

John L. Lewis and William Green both make a number of economic demands upon Congress in their statements opposing conscription. These demands include higher pay for soldiers, guarantees that men would get their jobs back after serving in the armed forces, etc. These demands, though too modest, deserve support. The Burke-Wadsworth bill is damned by the yardstick of these demands; we need mention only the coolie wages provided conscripts by the bill, and its phoney "promise" of getting men their jobs back.

(The very first day of formal debate on the bill in the Senate, Senator Norris drew an admission from Senator Barkley, administration leader, that the provision directing em-

ployers to rehire men after their service "probably" has no legal force!)

But it is not enough for the workers to make these types of economic demands. There still remains the question of fighting against the provisions for conscription by the capitalist state into the state's armed forces, and of offering an alternative method of military training for the manpower of this country.

It is on this key question that Lewis and Green are fundamentally wrong. All they say, at bottom, against the conscription bill is that conscription is not necessary *now*. Lewis' argument is against "compulsory conscription *in time of peace*"; and even in time of peace, he makes plain, he is ready to support conscription by the capitalist state, if it is first established that mass enlistments will not provide sufficient men. Therefore, he proposes:

**"The Congress of Industrial Organizations suggests that if there is a need for larger personnel in our armed forces, the method of voluntary enlistments be continued and relied upon to meet the needs of the present emergency. WE BELIEVE THAT A SUFFICIENT NUMBER OF VOLUNTARY ENLISTMENTS COULD BE SECURED if the pay for enlisted men were increased and the minimum period of enlistment reduced! Such an enlisted army, highly trained in the use of mechanized arms, would, we submit, meet our military defense problems." (CIO NEWS, August 5)**

Similarly, William Green's August 5 press statement says:

**"The AFL will give support to compulsory military training service legislation when such action becomes necessary in order to defend, protect and preserve America.**

**"However, in providing an adequate army for defensive purposes the American way should be followed first. A voluntary enlistment program should be launched by the Government designed to create an army of one million and a half men. This would be putting voluntary action before compulsion. American labor would respond to such a program wholeheartedly and enthusiastically."**

The stand against conscription taken by the official trade union leaders amounts, therefore, to:

1. The same kind of conscription that they now oppose, they are ready to support either (a) in war-time or (b) if mass enlistments do not provide enough men.

2. They enthusiastically support mass enlistments into the regular army and navy as better than conscription today in that it is (a) voluntary and (b) more democratic.

This position is identical with that taken by the "anti-conscription" senators, Wheeler, Vandenberg and their associates, who support a "compromise" offered by Senator Maloney of Connecticut. The Maloney amendment provides for mass enlistments until January; if by that time enlistments prove inadequate, the conscription provisions of the Burke-Wadsworth bill go into effect automatically.

It should be obvious that John L. Lewis is misusing words when he announces himself "in fundamental opposition to this Burke-Wadsworth measure". There's nothing fundamental about his opposition, for as we have seen he is for the key provisions of that measure either in war-time or if enlistments won't provide enough men.

But that's only half the picture. The truth is that Lewis' alternative to conscription, "voluntary enlistments", turns out upon careful examination to be neither voluntary, nor more democratic than conscription. After we examine the real nature of this enlistment proposal, every worker who is firm in his loyalty to the working class, must say: "Enlistment is just as reactionary as the conscription proposal. We must find another way, a way which will provide the workers with military training, but which will not put them at the mercy of the capitalist state and its reactionary army officer caste."

### **Would Enlistments Be Voluntary?**

The statement on conscription issued by the five Railroad Brotherhood presidents lets the cat out of the bag. After proposing one-year enlistments and more attractive pay, it says that under these conditions, "Thousands of UNEM-

PLOYED would enlist voluntarily if given an opportunity." (N. Y. Times, August 7).

Just let that idea sink in a moment. These gentlemen don't want their membership subject to the draft. But it's all right with them if UNEMPLOYED workers, including the hundreds of thousands of railroad workers driven out of the industry, are inducted into the army! They take it for granted that a shorter enlistment term and a few dollars higher pay would drive the unemployed into the army.

So far as their cold-blooded calculation goes, these very comfortable gentlemen are being accurate. Today and throughout the last ten years, the statistics of enlistment show, the majority of "volunteers" have come from the unemployed; they join up to eat and to learn a new trade which the recruiting posters promise them. Maybe, they hope, there'll be a job for them in their new trade when they get out.

A shorter term of enlistment and higher pay would be certain, therefore, to attract more of the unemployed. Those who today are hungry and in enforced idleness would be more tempted by the pay if they didn't have to sign away three years of their lives. Vain illusion! Anybody joining the army now would be certain to find himself unable to get out—just like the men who joined the National Guard for a little training and exercise, contracting for nothing more than this except in case of war, and who now find themselves, in violation of that contract, ordered by Congress into active service.

This is what John L. Lewis, William Green, and the rest of the AFL, CIO and Railroad Brotherhoods leadership are aiding and abetting. Voluntary? To be driven by hunger which one cannot otherwise feed is not voluntary. Democratic? There's nothing democratic about an army service system which will inevitably draw most of its men from among the ten million unemployed.

John L. Lewis doesn't put it as crudely as do the Railroad Brotherhoods, but that he knows what he is proposing will mainly hit the unemployed is shown by this revealing sentence: "Compulsory conscription would necessarily result in tremen-

dous dislocations among the lives of millions of individuals in industry and in communities throughout our country." Why won't mass enlistments do the same thing, those mass enlistments which Lewis advocates? Because—this is plainly the thought in Lewis' mind—the recruits will then come mainly from the unemployed, whose induction into the army won't "dislocate industry".

### **Sets Unemployed Against Employed Workers**

Bitter rage must fill the hearts of the unemployed workers, if they contemplate this spectacle of "labor leaders", living on a scale beyond the dreams of the highest-paid employed workers, proposing to penalize the unemployed by making them the chief victims of mass recruitment. It wasn't bad enough that the unemployed have been penalized by the present economic system; they must now pay for their joblessness by becoming soldiers.

Thus, instead of being the champions of the unemployed, Messrs. Lewis, Green and their associates treat the unemployed as second-class citizens, as people not deserving the same consideration and protection as dues-paying members of the unions.

Members of the trade unions! Awake in time to realize what a dangerous game your official leaders are playing! If they treat the unemployed as second-class citizens in this way, eventually the unemployed will answer in kind. A deep gap will be created between the unions and the unemployed. The unemployed will become enemies of the trade unions.

That's what happened in Germany. The pot-bellied bureaucrats who ran the unions were only interested in raking in the dues. They treated the unemployed like second-class citizens. A deep gap developed between the unions and the unemployed. Hitler used that to the full. He posed as the champion of the unemployed. He put tens of thousands of them in barracks where he fed them—and indoctrinated them with Nazism and clothed them—with Nazi uniforms.

In the name of fighting against fascism, the CIO and AFL leadership are making a "patriotic" proposal which can

only serve the interests of fascism in this country.

Already some of the most reactionary groups in this country are cleverly using this situation to pose as champions of the unemployed. The multi-millionaire Owen D. Young's so-called "American Youth Commission" is insisting on passage of the Burke-Wadsworth conscription bill because otherwise, it says hypocritically, the unemployed will be made to bear an entirely disproportionate share of the burden of military service.

What do you think would be the effect on the average unemployed man, of seeing the trade unions propose a system of military service which hits the unemployed most, and then seeing reactionary demagogues defending the interests of the unemployed against the proposal of the trade unions?

Woe to the trade unions if this situation is permitted to continue! But it must not continue. The labor movement must fight against creation of a regular army of millions of hunger-driven "volunteers", just as much as it should fight against creation of a regular army by the Burke-Wadsworth conscription bill. Because the labor movement, for its own salvation, must defend the interests of all—skilled and unskilled, employed and unemployed.

### **Why The Government Wants Conscription**

The light-minded way in which the AFL and CIO officialdom have agreed to support the conscription measure as soon as enlistments don't work shows that the trade union movement has failed to understand the fundamental meaning of the Burke-Wadsworth conscription bill. If the workers did understand, they would never permit their leaders under any circumstances to support conscription.

Why is the conscription bill introduced at this time, and with the backing of the government, the dominant sections of the two capitalist parties, and of the capitalist class generally? Neither Lewis nor Green attempt to answer this fundamental question.

About three years ago, the present chairman of the Senate Military Affairs Committee, then ambitiously aspiring to

reach the post he now occupies, got a brilliant idea. Thought Senator Sheppard: why not enact into law some of the provisions of the M-Day plans? Forthwith, together with his friend Congressman May, he drew up and introduced the notorious Sheppard-May Bill.

Senator Sheppard "represents" Texas, thanks to the help of a poll tax law and a Jim Crow system whereby the black and many white workers and farmers have no vote. He is therefore not very sensitive to the problem of not offending the masses. But other Senators have that problem. Finally an informal committee took Sheppard aside and told him the facts of life. He and May were arousing opposition to the M-Day plans by their crude insistence on enacting them into law at that time. Why do that when laws like that are not yet needed? Sheppard and May saw the light. They retired their bill into the background.

The moral of this story is that the hard-headed and cold-blooded leaders of the Republican and Democratic parties who have now united in advocating immediate execution of the main M-Day plan, conscription, know just what they are doing. They have thought this thing through with about as much emotion as an adding machine. They *need* conscription now and they therefore demand a law far more frightful than that which they correctly called Sheppard and May fools for trying to get in 1937. Because then they didn't need it and now they do.

When a demagogue like Senator Wheeler calls the conscription proposal a product of "war hysteria", he is lying, and he knows he is lying. He knows the gentlemen who have commanded the passage of conscription, and he knows they are not hysterical; they are too calculating a crew for that. When a hypocrite like Senator Vandenberg says that conscription is "unnecessary", he is only throwing sand in the eyes of the masses. Unnecessary for the workers and farmers who would be the victims of conscription? Of course! But a desperate necessity for American capitalism and its political agents.

## Why We Oppose The Bill

Conscription, like the gigantic arms program already voted, is called for at this time by the capitalist class because it is preparing for military aggression in the near future on a world scale.

The question whether German imperialism, having conquered Europe, can or cannot "attack" the United States has nothing to do with the real issue. The very existence of one great imperialist power in the modern world is an "attack" on the others. The United States, as an imperialist power having its foundations throughout the world, is "attacked" anywhere a rival power attempts to seize a market, a piece of territory, or a sphere of influence. The very existence of two imperialist powers in this capitalist world means that they "attack" each other and hence must settle the issue from time to time by war. That is why war is inevitable under the capitalist system.

The conscription measure is, therefore, a *result* of the very nature of American imperialism. John L. Lewis puts the cart before the horse when he says (in his speech at the Auto Union convention) that "by that act (conscription) our Congress is planting the seeds of destruction of democracy and is paving the way for the rise of a new imperialistic nation within the confines of the U. S. A." No, Brother Lewis, the seeds of destruction are already planted, they were planted before the last World War, when the United States was already an imperialistic nation. *Because* they are imperialists by their very being, the American imperialists want conscription.

Precisely for that reason the workers must fight against conscription by the capitalists not only when it is "unnecessary" but also when it is "necessary." Because it is *never* necessary for the workers. *Any* war undertaken by the capitalist government of the United States will be an imperialist war, undeserving of the support of the working class.

Because they fail to answer as we do the question why the capitalist class now seeks conscription, the CIO and AFL fail to put up a consistent, *fundamental* fight against the conscription bill.

To our analysis, Lewis might retort: "You are a Marxist, a revolutionary socialist, interested in overthrowing capitalism. I am not. Therefore we cannot agree on one approach to conscription."

Very well, then, let us examine the conscription measure from a "Simon pure" trade union point of view. Even from that limited outlook Lewis and Green fail to criticise the Burke-Wadsworth bill deeply enough.

### **Why Unionists Should Oppose The Bill**

Perhaps the most glaring example of the superficiality of AFL and CIO criticism of the bill is their complete failure to explain to their members the meaning of that provision in the bill which empowers the president to exempt from immediate service those men whose work in industry "is found" to justify exemption. These exemptions are to be determined "under such regulations as he may prescribe."

Green and Lewis know exactly what that means. For the regulations in question are not a matter for future elaboration by Roosevelt; they have been in writing since 1926 when they were drawn up by the Joint Army and Navy Selective Service Committee to await just such a moment as this.

Why weren't they put in the conscription bill, in place of the blanket power given to the president to prescribe the regulations? *Because if those regulations were part of the bill, millions of workers who are now not thinking too much about the bill one way or the other, would be aroused to an understanding of what a reactionary anti-labor weapon it is.*

The Joint Army and Navy Selective Service Committee drew up regulations laying down the *one* method of exemptions of this type which the army and navy and those they speak for—the capitalist class as a whole—will use for *any* bill they vote for. *Under these regulations, to enter a claim for exemption (deferment), a worker will have to submit two affidavits, one by his immediate superior, one by the executive head of the company by which he is employed.*

These affidavits will be the sole method of determining whether that worker is or is not entitled to exemption be-

cause of his indispensability in the work he is doing. Militant trade unionists will be gotten rid of by the simple device of their employers refusing to sign their affidavits, while finks will be rewarded with affidavits. It's the chance of a lifetime for union-busting bosses!

These regulations are known to every student, even a casual one, of the conscription system. Yet not a word about them has been said by either the AFL or CIO officials. Is it because they are afraid to scratch too deep in making their criticism of the conscription bill, since they know that these regulations are designed to be used in connection with *any* conscription bill, no matter how "liberal" it sounds? Yet deep they must scratch, if they are to be considered loyal to the interests of the many millions of union men and women for whom they speak.

We have now seen what will happen in industry, where the conscription regulations will help employers to weed out militant unionists and hold that threat as a club over the organized workers. That will be the regime in the factories.

*And now let us ask a question, (still from a "Simon pure" union standpoint) which Lewis and Green do not even hint at. What will happen to the workers who are drafted into the army? What kind of regime will they live under?*

### **The Army's Open Shop Regime**

Lewis and Green are able to escape raising this question because most workers, unfortunately, are not thinking about this problem. These workers do not give thought to the nature of the regime in the army because they take the present nature of the army for granted. As if to say: "That's what armies have been, are, and will be". But they are profoundly wrong; and they must change their mind on this key question, if the working class is not to become the slave of military dictatorship and fascism.

There was a time when there were no trade unions. The open shop was all that workers knew. The boss had virtually the power of life and death over the workers. And since they had no experience of any other kind of regime in the factory,

many workers did not think of the possibility of any other kind. They were in the same state of mind as most union men today are about the possibility of a different kind of regime in the armed forces. It took a vanguard of class-conscious workers to arouse the mass of workers to realize that the open shop was not an immutable law of nature. The same kind of vanguard is needed today to arouse the mass of workers to realize that the open shop in the armed forces is neither a law of nature nor the only way to train millions in the military arts.

There is, of course, an explanation why the open shop in industry has given way to the unionization of many millions of workers, while the open shop has remained in the army. Unionization of industry is not a direct and immediate threat to the power and property of the bosses—so long as they retain the open shop in the army. Whenever union demands become too intolerable to the bosses, they use the open shop army (which in this sense includes the police and the National Guard) to drive back the unions.

But the army could not be used for these anti-labor purposes if the officers did not have the power of life and death over the ranks of the soldiers. Only under that power can the officers drive young workers and farmers in uniforms to smash picket lines.

If simple democratic rights existed in the army—the right of the rank and file to gather and discuss without the supervision of officers, the right of the rank and file to publish a newspaper of their own, their right to elect committees to present their grievances to the officers, etc.—it would become impossible for the army to be used as an anti-labor force. Just for that reason the army remains an open shop, i.e., a place where the workers have no rights at all.

If Lewis and Green were really representing the interests of the labor movement, their criticism of the conscription bill would include a denunciation of the open shop regime in the army. And this denunciation would, of course, prevent them from advocating mass enlistments into the open shop army.

## **If Not Conscription, Then What?**

If Lewis and Green were really leading the workers, instead of leaning on the most backward layers they can find among the workers, they would not be letting capitalist demagogues like Wheeler and Vandenberg "speak for Labor" in Congress on the conscription question. Instead they would say:

"The quarrel in Congress is a difference of opinion between two sections of the bosses over which is the best method of getting an open shop army which will be used for the benefit of the capitalists and against the interests of the workers. We don't take either the side of the pro-conscriptionists or the side of the 'volunteers'. Those two alternatives are not the only ways to train the workers in the military arts.

"There is another way, one which is in the interests of Labor. And that way is through our trade unions! Just as our unions make possible our very existence, giving us the ability to lift our heads like men in the factories and to live like human beings at home, so our unions can enable us to undergo military training in the atmosphere of the union hall and not in that of the barracks. Compulsory military training? Yes! But only under the direct control of the trade unions."

That, in short, would be a *working class* answer to the question of how the workers of this country should receive training in military arts.

### **Labor's Military Program**

Along this line, Labor has a clear and unambiguous answer to make to the government's demand that the masses undergo military training:

"Yes, we are for military training. We don't want to see worker-soldiers go into battle without proper training and equipment. Nor do we want worker-soldiers in the hands of capitalist officers who have no regard for the treatment, the protection and the lives of the men under them.

"Therefore we demand federal funds for the military

training of workers and worker-officers under the control of the trade unions. Does that mean we want military appropriations? Yes—but only for the establishment and equipment of workers' training camps!

“Does this mean compulsory military training of workers? Yes—but only under the control of the trade unions!”

### **Learn The Lessons of This War!**

This workers' program for military training is the only kind of program which the trade union movement can honorably support. Support of “voluntary” enlistment or conscription by the capitalist state constitutes a betrayal of the interests of the working class.

In this epoch of militarism great questions can be decided only with the aid of military means—this has been demonstrated by the developments of the present war.

Let us therefore brush aside pacifists fools. But also let us thrust aside those equally traitors to the working class, the agents and apologists of “democratic” imperialism.

For the victories of the fascist war machine of Hitler have destroyed every plausible basis for the illusion that a serious military struggle against fascism can be conducted under the leadership of a bourgeois democratic regime. The war in Europe, as previously in the Spanish rehearsal, has shown up the hollowness, the rottenness and the contemptible cowardice and greed of the whole ruling stratum of the bourgeois democrats. They are unwilling to sacrifice anything but the lives of the duped masses. To save their own hides and their property the capitalists were ready in one country after another to capitulate to fascism and seek its protection against the wrath of their own people. The American bosses will be no better.

The fight against fascism, at home and abroad, can be won only by the independent action of the working class. That is the supreme lesson of the present war.

The first step in that fight is for the working class to adopt the military program which we have just outlined.

That should be Labor's answer to conscription!

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