

# Struggle in Ladies Garment Union is Reaching Climax—By Rose Wortis

TEN months ago, in the midst of a strike that was on the verge of a vicious settlement, the bureaucracy of the I. L. G. W. U. expelled the Left Wing Joint Board, representing about 75% of the entire membership, and brought about an internal war in the Union—a war which has not only destroyed the improvements gained during the recent strike of 1926 but has completely wiped out the standards gained by the workers thru many years of struggle. Because the union had just gone thru a long and bitter strike, Sigman had hoped that the workers would be unable to offer resistance to his attempt to force his leadership on the cloak and dressmakers.

In the course of this struggle the Sigman administration has revealed itself before the workers in all its ugliness. The methods employed in this attempt to crush the revolt of the workers can find no parallel in the history of the American labor movement. The injunction, hitherto considered a weapon in the hands of the employers, was freely made use of by the Sigman machine. Sigman had the hearty support of the Jewish Daily Forward, the entire reactionary trade union-bureaucracy, the bosses, the police, the courts and the judges. With the aid of hired thugs he established a reign of terror in the Union and in the garment district, which is the scene of bloody encounters daily.

And in spite of all this terrorism, in spite of all these forces that are lined up with Sigman, he has up to this day failed to establish his control in the industry. He has succeeded in but one respect, namely, to reduce the industry to a complete state of chaos which has even surpassed the conditions that prevailed in 1919 prior to the existence of an organized union in the trade. It is becoming evident to everyone in close touch with the situation that the plans of both the Sigman machine and the employers have failed to materialize. After many months of complete deadlock between the Right and Left Wing forces the situation has reached a turning point which is decidedly in favor of the Left Wing. We will here briefly state and analyze the following forces that are unmistakably driving the Sigman machine to its ultimate collapse:

## 1. The Employers

The plan to expel the Left Wing administration was decided upon jointly with the bosses, who had gone thru the appalling experience of dealing with the Left Wing administration which had insisted on forcing union conditions and had mobilized the workers in an open struggle in order to secure improvements in their standards. Having been promised by Sigman that with their aid the Left Wing would be annihilated within a short time, the bosses readily gave their support to the Right administration in its efforts to crush the militant spirit of the cloak and dressmakers.

The ten months struggle, however, has convinced the employers that the Left Wing administration which has the support of the masses cannot be broken by a combination of union bureaucrats with the bosses. The advantages they had hoped for by supporting Sigman were counteracted by the demoralization in the industry which has reached a point where cut-throat competition, resulting from the chaotic conditions, has created such a state of uncertainty in the market that it is absolutely impossible to standardize the trade. No matter how big a reduction in wages the legitimate manufacturers could effect, no matter to what extent they would increase the working hours of their employees, the bosses are not in a position to compete with

the overwhelming number of open shops that spring up like mushrooms overnight. The legitimate employers, who were among the first to give their support to Sigman, are now beginning to see that they have unleashed a powerful demon that threatens to destroy them together with the Union.

Already the more responsible factors in the industry are beginning to give serious consideration to these problems, as indicated by the recent conference, called by the Impartial Chairman Ingersoll, where the legitimate employers of the Industrial Council openly stated that they are threatened with complete destruction unless some radical steps are taken to stem the growth of the open shop menace. This economic factor will undoubtedly play an important role in the outcome of the struggle.

## 2. The Registered Workers

It is common knowledge that Sigman is completely discredited amongst the great mass of the cloak and dressmakers and that the present Left Wing movement is but the outgrowth of many previous rank and file revolts against the Right Wing leadership of the I. L. G. W. U. and its policies. However, the coercive methods employed by Sigman to force his domination and the economic pressure immediately after the strike has compelled many workers in sympathy with the Left Wing to submit and register with Sigman's dual union. They did not realize at the time that in giving their support to Sigman (even though unwillingly) they would not be able to save themselves from the destructive effects of the internal war.

Now these masses who have registered with Sigman so as to avoid losing their jobs realize that their support of Sigman made possible the present break-down in union standards and conditions. These workers are beginning to revolt against the low wages, long hours and complete collapse of union standards and are seeking methods by which to force a termination of the present war. The Shop Chairmen's Council and the Independent Committee For Peace are but crude

expressions of that desire on the part of the workers to once more unite the Union.

## 3. The Split Within the Bureaucratic Machine

In the first few months of this internal conflict all the reactionary forces within the "machine", backed by the Forward, united in the effort to crush the Left Wing movement. Now that Sigman has failed to accomplish this defeat, the conflicting forces within the "machine" are beginning to assert themselves demanding more power to their respective cliques.

Breslau, who was driven out of the Union during the Left Wing victory of 1926, is once more on the scene and is receiving the silent support of the Forward, which is unofficially backing him as against Sigman because the latter has been unable to "deliver the goods".

The Centrist elements, who supported Sigman because of their opposition to the Left and the Extreme Right, are now placed in a position where they have to make their choice between giving over the Union to the Breslau machine where they would be completely eliminated, or saving whatever remnants they can by making peace with the Left Wing.

## 4. The Joint Board, Backed by the Great Mass of the Workers

The fighting against overwhelming forces, surrounded on all sides by the hostility from the official labor movement, the capitalist press, the State machinery and the bosses, the Joint Board has retained the confidence of the workers and has been able to maintain its position. Now, on the tenth month of this bitter struggle, it is generally admitted by all factors directly involved in this conflict that the workers will never accept the leadership of the reactionary clique, that there is no possibility for restoring order in the industry, no possibility for maintaining the Union without the participation of the Left Wing elements.

These outstanding factors, as outlined above, indicate that the struggle is coming to a head and

that the deadlock, which existed for the past few months, will be terminated.

There are two possibilities in sight for the culmination of the struggle:

1. That the workers, who had been accustomed to higher standards and have ideologically outgrown the sweat-shop system, realizing that the present breakdown of union conditions at first considered but a temporary state threatens to become permanent, will revolt in mass against this new yoke of slavery and drive out the reactionary clique. In that event they will line up with the Joint Board in its efforts to restore union conditions and rebuild the Union.

2. That the pressure from the employers and workers, and the scramble for power within the ranks of the bureaucracy, together with the new offensive of the Left Wing, will compel either one of the groups to seek peace with the Joint Board so as to retain some hold in the Union.

These possibilities are slowly shaping themselves. How soon they will crystallize into definite action will depend on the force of the new offensive which was launched by the Joint Board with the Madison Square Garden demonstration on Saturday, September 10th.

Whatever the outcome of this struggle may be, the needle trade workers have contributed an invaluable page to the history of the American labor movement. During this period of blackest reaction, when the most powerful unions (such as the Miners'), led by the bureaucracy of the A. F. of L., are being destroyed without any sign of resistance, the bitter struggle of the needle trade workers against company unionism carried on over a period of ten months is a beacon light to guide the betrayed and misled workers in other trades to new struggles against the capitalist class of this country and their labor lieutenants of the trade union movement.

# Wages and American Prosperity—By Earl Browder

SURELY America is prosperous. Producing the greatest stream of commodities the world has ever seen—increasing the productivity per worker at a marvelous rate (estimated at 50% in the past five years), piling up accumulated profits that place America in the position of financial ruler of the world. But this prosperity benefits only the capitalists, to a lesser extent the middle classes, and slightly a few specially-favored workers in strategic places. The mass of the workers in America find their standard of living constantly declining.

Recent investigations of the U. S. Dept. of Labor furnish further proofs of this fact. No one, I am sure, will suspect that the Dept. of Labor has any wish to stir up discontent. It is, on the contrary, inclined to make conditions look better than they really are. Yet the investigations into wages in the steel and textile industries tells the story of constantly falling wages.

**Low Wages in Steel and Textiles.**  
In 1920, the average full-time weekly earnings in the steel industry, including the highest-paid as well as common labor, was \$45.65. In 1924 the figure had dropped to \$35.22, and in 1926 to \$34.41. The loss from 1920 to 1926 was 24.6 per cent.

During the same period the productivity of labor increased by approximately 50% in the steel industry.

In the woolen and worsted goods industry, the drop in average wages from 1920 to 1926 was 24.8 per cent.

The cotton goods manufacturing industry shows an even greater decrease in wages, the drop being 31.7 per cent between 1920 and 1926.

Another picture of how the workers are sharing American prosperity is to be seen in a recent report of the Women's Bureau, Dept. of Labor, on "Women's Employment in Vegetable Canned in Delaware". Conditions of white and Negro women were compared, showing the Negro women are exploited doubly. One-third of the white women, and three-fourths of the Negro women received less than \$7 per week.

## No Living Wage for Railroad Workers

It is a popular superstition that railroad workers earn a living wage. But more than 200,000 track laborers average \$17 per week. (See Monthly Labor Review, Aug., 1927). In the lumber industry, one district averages \$10.48 per week, while the whole country brings the average only to \$17.77. Other figures given show that millions of adult workers must be living on an income of \$10 to \$15 per week.

According to the figures of the same Dept. of Labor, the minimum wage necessary to maintain a family of five in decent conditions is around \$40 per week.

In addition to the declining wages the working class feels the effects of "prosperity" in America in increasing unemployment. Although production is increasing phenomenally compared to former years, the number of workers in industry is decreasing. Even the capitalists are remarking that unemployment is of a chronic nature; in the midst of the greatest prosperity ever known, is the characteristic of the United States today.

## Workers Must Be Prepared for Struggle Against the Bosses

Facing such conditions as these, the American Federation of Labor, meeting in convention in Los Angeles, will doubtless hear again from Green, Wolf, Frey and others, how the "social wage" is being achieved by them for the working class, by means of the B. & O. Plan, expelling the left wing, setting up "labor" banks in partnership with capitalists, sabotaging the efforts of the unorganized and unskilled workers, and proclaiming and practicing peace and collaboration with the employing class, even in the carrying out of its wage-cutting, exploitation-intensifying campaign.

Now, more than ever, when even this "prosperity" is giving way to industrial depression at least for a time, it is necessary to awaken the workers, in and out of the trade unions, to the necessity of organization for struggle against the employers.