

Drive Against Left Wing in Trade Unions

By WM. Z. FOSTER.

WITHIN the past two years a comparatively new phenomenon has made its appearance in the American labor movement. This is the expulsion of members from the trade unions because of their political opinions and for activities in accordance with these opinions. In the past there have been many struggles between the reactionaries and the revolutionary wing of the movement and the utmost bitterness has prevailed between the two factions. But almost never was the weapon of expulsion used in a general way in these struggles, save in the cases where there was open advocacy of secession, and even this was winked at in many cases. As a general rule the fight remained pretty much in the realms of verbal argument, however bitterly this may have been carried on.

But, as stated, in the past two years the expulsion of members from the unions, and consequently often from their jobs, has come to be looked upon and applied as a regular weapon against the left wing by the reactionaries. The difference is that where expulsion was once practiced more or less spasmodically and in isolated cases, it has now become a settled means of warfare by the controlling bureaucrats in the unions.

The union that has the shame of having first applied expulsion against the left wing is the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, which began the policy two years ago under the leadership of Sigman. Unable to beat the revolutionary elements otherwise, Sigman, aided by his lickspittle, Perlstein, that to get the best of them by driving them out of the union altogether. Brutally he expelled many of the leading left wingers from the organization in Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland and elsewhere, merely for membership in the T. U. E. L., with disastrous effects upon the union.

These destructive tactics of Sigman received a blessing from Gompers himself at the Portland convention of the American Federation of Labor in 1923, where with the most elaborate stage setting and in the fullest glare of publicity, he expelled William F. Dunne from the convention. Dunne was a regular delegate from the Silver Bow, Montana, Trades Council, and the only charge against him was that he was an avowed Communist. Dunne's expulsion was the signal in the trade union movement generally for the use of the weapon of expulsion against the growing left wing, and the reactionaries have not been slow to take the hint. Since then, in union after union, this policy, which is contrary to the basic principles of labor solidarity, has been applied.

Lewis in the miners' union has made drastic application of this mean. He immediately outlawed the Trade Union Educational League as a "dual union," and expelled Tom Myerscough and other miner leaders of it. He sacrificed the militants in the Canadian districts. Farrington of Illinois has followed this up by the expulsion of Thompson, Watt, and others. Throughout the whole organization a reign of terror has been set up against the left wing and every manifestation of it has been driven underground upon pain of expulsion.

Hutcheson of the carpenters, not to be outdone by his crony Lewis, has expelled two-thirds of his organization in Detroit for sympathies with the Trade Union Educational League. In Los Angeles, with the cooperation of the police, he got rid of more militants. And his latest maneuver has been to bar Rosen as a delegate from the New York district council of the carpenters because Rosen ran against him on a left wing ticket in the recent national elections.

In the electrical workers a number of militants have been expelled, and in the painters the intention to do the same has been shown by the adoption at their recent convention of an amendment to their national constitution providing for the exclusion of "members of the Communist Party who oppose the principles of the A. F. of L."



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In the machinists' union, under the yellow socialist Johnston, an early stand was taken in this game by expelling a number of militants in Toledo, Ohio, for membership in the T. U. E. L. At the ensuing convention Johnston managed to save his skin and to hang on to his job. Now, claiming the action of the convention was an endorsement of the expulsion policy, he has issued a ukase demanding the wholesale expulsion of members of the Workers Party and members of the T. U. E. L. throughout the entire union.

The fur workers was also the scene of an active expulsion campaign, with interesting results not figured on by the reactionary, Kaufmann.

And now we have the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, which so long passed as a left inclined union, showing that here, too, the reactionary bureaucracy refuses to be outdone by the reactionaries in the miners, machinists, carpenters, et al, and is expelling militant left wingers on the usual pretexts. Other unions are following the same program in a more or less desultory fashion. And along with this campaign has gone a further systematic terrorizing of the left wing in the unions by refusing to let the militants run for office, by placing heavy fines against them upon all sorts of flimsy pretexts, etc.

A number of central labor councils have also put into effect the expulsion policy, insofar as their limited authority permits them, by refusing to seat as delegates the Communists who have been elected by the affiliated local unions. The chief offenders in this respect are the councils in Minneapolis, Seattle, and Los Angeles. It is noteworthy that these are all left wing strongholds. The reason for the sharp application of the expulsion policy in these places is twofold, first, the necessity of the bureaucracy to fight the left wing with all the means in its power, and, second, the presence of all sorts of renegade socialists who are the most willing and unscrupulous tools to lead this fight of the reactionaries.

So far in the Chicago Federation of Labor the expulsion policy has not actually been applied. The leaders of the Chicago Federation, Fitzpatrick and Nockels, who long posed as radicals, work more insidiously. They conspire privately with the controlling fakers in the local unions to prevent left wingers coming as delegates. In addition they are carrying on publicly the most contemptible fight against the Communists. It is noteworthy that Green, in one of his latest fulminations against the left wing, used verbatim the lying arguments contained in a circular recently sent out by the Chicago Federation of Labor.

At the recent American Federation of Labor convention the expulsion policy once again got the support of the united labor bureaucrats. And in his Detroit speech a short while before the convention, Green declared for an open war upon the Communists. He said:

"Organized labor will not and cannot tolerate Communism or Communists. Members of organized labor are either trade unionists or Communists. They cannot be both. In view of the fact that the Communists have challenged and are challenging the hosts of or-

ganized labor and by every means at their disposal are seeking to secure supreme control of the trade union movement of America, we, the loyal members and officers of the organized labor movement will strike back and strike hard. We will neither rest nor cease our efforts until Communism and the Communist philosophy and those who represent it are driven from the ranks of organized labor."

What is the basis for this expulsion policy which is now being used so violently against the left wing? The cause of it has two roots. The cause is to be found in the improved fighting policies of the left wing within the last few years, which makes it necessary for the reactionaries to proceed to more drastic measures of struggle. The second is to be found in the turn of the labor bureaucracy more sharply than ever towards class collaboration, which weakens their control over the organized masses, and which throws them into the imperative necessity at this time of destroying the influence of the left wing at all costs, regardless of the means used.

As to the first proposition: For many years the left wing, because of its infatuation for infantile ideas of dual unionism, was a negligible factor in the trade unions. The reactionary bureaucracy had plain sailing to control the masses for their policies—the opposition of the yellow socialists being never very vital. Hence there was little or no need for an expulsion policy, except in special occasions where more or less spontaneous local revolts occurred. But now the situation is fundamentally altered. The left wing, despite all its failings, has learned how to fight in the unions. It has almost fully recovered from the dualism which hamstrung it for so long and it has learned the main principles of left wing organization in conservative trade unions. Moreover, it no longer wastes its time in these unions, as it once did, in an empty, negative criticism of the organizations and their officials in general. Now it has a practical program for the revolutionizing of the unions. It takes the lead, so far as its all too weak resources will permit, in the everyday struggles of the masses. It contests the union elections against the reactionaries. In other words, it is now engaged in a real struggle against the bureaucrats for the leadership of the unions. The effectiveness of these new tactics of the left wing was graphically demonstrated by the tremendous sweep of the amalgamation movement. The reactionary bureaucrats, confronted with the new menace of an organized left wing that has learned how to fight for control of the organized workers, had to strike back quickly and hard. The expulsion campaign was their answering tactics.

Now as to the other phase of the expulsion policy: The great defeat of the trade union movement in the historic struggle of 1920-23 demonstrated clearly the burning necessity for the trade unions to consolidate their ranks, to organize a labor party, and generally to adopt a more militant policy of struggle. But the bureaucrats controlling the unions absolutely refused to learn this lesson. Instead of developing the power of resistance of the unions as against the employers and adopting a policy of an offensive, they proceeded to hoist the white flag of surrender, and accordingly began to work out and apply the various new schemes of class collaboration, such as the B. and O. plan, workers' insurance, labor banking, etc., which are tending to degrade the trade unions into little better than company unions. But such a policy was not without its hazards for them. It had to be fairly rammed down the throats of the rank and file of the unions, who, for the most part, although not yet ideologically advanced enough to penetrate the real meaning of the new schemes of class collaboration and to develop a real opposition to them, nevertheless refuse to accept them in place of a policy of militant action and the substantial results which such a policy brings. They want amalgamation, the formation of a labor party, the organization of the unorganized, and at

least some semblance of a fighting program. This creates a situation highly dangerous to the bureaucracy. The rank and file are susceptible to the propaganda of the left wing. Hence a basic condition for their control of the unions and for the continuance of the class collaboration program recently so highly developed is to crush the left wing at all costs. This cannot be done by argument and ideological struggle. Consequently the resort to force through the expulsion policy and the many other harsh disciplinary measures that are being used against the militants in the various unions.

What shall our policy be in this situation? How shall we successfully defeat the expulsion policy of the reactionaries and reach the rank and file with our message? The fate of our work in the trade union in the present period depends upon our correctly solving this problem.

The first and most important step to its solution is the mustering of the full available forces of our party for work in the trade unions. There still remains much to be done in this respect. A very large proportion of our membership do not yet belong to unions, and of those who are members only a small percentage are really active. These conditions must be remedied at once. A persistent and insistent campaign must be carried on to the end that every proletarian member of our party is at the same time a member of a trade union. We must make our members understand once and for all the truth of the statement in the recent letter of the Comintern and Profintern to the effect that no worker in an industrial country like the United States can really be a Communist unless he is a member of a trade union. And we must see to it that our members not only join the trade unions but become active in them. The only Communist in the trade unions who is worth his salt to our party is the one who militantly and intelligently fights to put its program into effect and thus to extend its influence over the masses. This development of our full party strength is the first and foundation step, not only for combatting the expulsion policy, but also doing any successful work whatever in the trade unions.

A special feature of our fight against expulsion must be a flexible attitude towards the expulsion orders now in force in the unions, whether they be in the shape of constitutional amendments, as in the painters, or instructions from the executive boards, as in the machinists. In the trade unions there are organized proletarian masses, contact with whom is vital for the success of the revolutionary work of our party. This contact can best be maintained only if we are members of the unions. Hence we must put up a militant and intelligent struggle to remain within the unions. If we can do this openly as members of the Workers Party and the Trade Union Educational League, all the better. But if the opposition is in such a desperate frame of mind as to use the expulsion policy and is in a position to apply it effectively, then we must be prepared to deny our membership in these organizations rather than be expelled from the unions.

Such a policy means the occasional swallowing of nasty pills in the way of signing the various statements that are put up to us by the reactionary officials in the hope that our revolutionary gorge will rise against them to the extent that we will not sign them, and thus make our expulsion all the more easy. A type of such statement was that recently gotten out by the carpenters district council of Cleveland, which reads as follows:

"I, the undersigned, do hereby promise and agree that I will observe and comply with all the rules, regulations, and laws of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, and that I will in no way affiliate with, or give support, assistance, or comfort to, the Trade Union Educational League, (Continued on page 3)

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or any similar or kindred organization.

"I further agree that I waive the right, benefit, or privilege of ever representing a local union of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America in any way, shape or manner as an officer, delegate, or committeeman during my membership in such organization.

"In subscribing to the above I do so of my own free will and accord and agree that if I should violate said agreement or pledge, it is understood that my membership in the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America be forfeited without complaint by me."

In such cases we must bear in mind the advice of Lenin and Zinoviev and sign a dozen such statements if necessary to our maintaining membership in the unions. This does not mean however that we must adopt a policy of indiscriminately denying membership and of signing such statements. On the contrary, each case must be separately considered. In those unions where we are strong the bureaucrats can never enforce such reactionary measures. At all times we must function in the unions, and we must fight for the right to do this frankly and openly. Only where we are actually confronted with expulsion shall we adopt the expedient of denying membership as a weapon in defense of our right as workers to belong to the trade unions.

The program of expulsion is a policy of desperation. It cannot succeed. Brutal suppression of the left wing

cannot serve as a substitute for the powerful organization and militant program imperatively demanded by the workers in their struggles against the employers. For a time however, in spite of the mustering of our forces and denials of membership, it will hinder us by resulting in the comparative isolation of many good comrades. But if these expelled members follow the Comintern policy, by refusing to start rival unions and by waging a militant fight for reinstatement, identifying this fight with the burning needs and struggles of the unions, and cooperating with the organized left elements in the unions they can eventually break this isolation and force their way back into their organizations.

To defeat the left wing by a policy of expulsion is impossible. The masses must build their unions and give them fighting policies. This can be done only under left wing leadership, and the organized masses are bound to accept such leadership despite all the efforts of the reactionaries to divorce them from it. Never was this more effectively demonstrated than in the needle trades. Sigman and Kaufmann tried the expulsion policy and the reign of terror method against the left wing, with results that are now a matter of history. And as the expulsion policy failed in the needle industry so it will fail, sooner or later, in all the industries. The left wing cannot be destroyed by expulsion, nor can its progress be stopped by it. The left wing has the program which corresponds to the needs of the trade union masses. That is the deciding factor in the situation.