

The

STRIKE SITUATION

and

Organized Labor's Wage and Job Strategy

by WILLIAM Z. FOSTER



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WAGE AND JOB STRATEGY**

By William Z. Foster

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Z. Foster, the author of this pamphlet, is the National Chairman of the Communist Party and a veteran leader of the American labor movement. He led the great steel strike of 1919 which helped to pave the way to industrial unionization of the basic industries. He is the author of several books, including *Pages From a Worker's Life* and *From Bryan to Stalin*, as well as scores of pamphlets on political and labor problems. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the author's militant activity and leadership in the American trade union movement.

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In this early postwar period the workers throughout the United States are demanding wage increases, generally running to about 30 per cent. This is one of the broadest wage movements in American history, involving many industries—steel, auto, machine building, radio-electric, railroad, oil, marine transport, building, lumber, coal, textile, printing, motion pictures, etc.—and it is being led by A. F. of L., C.I.O., and independent unions.

The basis of the present huge wage movement is the workers' resistance to the general slash in take-home pay that has occurred since the ending of the war—through the elimination of overtime, the down-grading of pay rates, etc. During the war the workers' wages lagged far behind the rise in living costs. By applying the "Little Steel" formula, which restricted basic wage rate increases to not more than 15 per cent above the rates in effect on January 1, 1941, the War Labor Board ignored the fact that the cost of living had actually advanced about 50 per cent during this period, as the figures of both the A. F. of L. and C.I.O. clearly demonstrate. And, of course, the workers' wages failed to keep pace with the gigantic war-time profits of the employers which, after paying taxes, averaged three times higher than the pre-war year 1939. The bosses have been indulging in a regular orgy of profit-grabbing while labor was making war.

In order to carry through their wage demands, which are inextricably bound up with the problems of furnish-

ing jobs and relief to the unemployed, it is indispensable that the workers proceed along the lines of a definite strategy calculated to mobilize the maximum of support behind their proposals. This pamphlet indicates some of the major lines necessary to such a strategy.

The Unity of Organized Labor

It is becoming increasingly clear that the Truman Administration, in spite of its pledges to carry out the Roosevelt policies, is yielding to the pressure of the bosses and is sacrificing the most elementary economic needs of the workers. Therefore, the workers must look, in first line, to the strength of their own organizations, particularly the trade unions, to put through their wage demands. This especially emphasizes the need, in this critical post-war period, for the greatest possible unity within the ranks of the workers.

First, in this respect, it is necessary to soften, or to do away entirely with, the warfare that the top leaders of the A. F. of L. and the U.M.W.A. are waging against the C.I.O. The attempts of such men as William Green, Matthew Woll, W. L. Hutcheson, David Dubinsky, John L. Lewis, etc., to destroy the C.I.O. in the postwar period, are a crime against the whole labor movement. Their hopes that the C.I.O. will fall to pieces after the war (with them helping to destroy it) are apparent. Were the A. F. of L. to succeed in breaking the C.I.O. it would ruin not only labor's hard-won organization in the trustified industries, but it would also undermine the whole position of the A. F. of L. itself. One can hardly imagine anything more suicidal to the workers' interests than the fight of the A. F. of L. reactionaries against the C.I.O., a fight from which only the employers can benefit and which dovetails exactly with the union-smashing program of the National Association of Manufacturers.

The lower bodies of the A. F. of L.—the international unions, state federations, city labor councils and local unions—should take a hand in this situation and insist upon a cooperative policy being followed by their top leaders toward the C.I.O. During the present wage movements many fine examples of A. F. of L.-C.I.O. collaboration have developed in various industries and localities. These are steps in the right direction, and they should be followed through vigorously. Such local and industrial cooperative movements should be forerunners of a general get-together policy by the A. F. of L. and C.I.O. If the rank and file of labor will take a determined stand in this unity matter, even the hardest boiled reactionaries in the A. F. of L. Executive Council will have to pay attention.

A second vital consideration in the present big movement to protect wages and to provide jobs is the need to extend trade union organization still further into the vast ranks of the unorganized. There are still many millions of workers outside the labor unions—especially workers in the manufacturing industries, white collar workers, agricultural workers and workers in small towns. These workers all feel the need for higher wages and will readily respond to trade union organizing campaigns. The question of organizing the unorganized, therefore, should now be made a central issue throughout the labor movement. Organized labor will make a big mistake if it does not utilize the present wage movement to greatly strengthen itself by drawing several millions of new workers into its ranks. Such increased trade union strength is deeply needed for the big tasks ahead in protecting the workers' and the nations' interests in every sphere of our economic and political life.

Thirdly, in order to solidify its own ranks, organized labor must also pay special attention to defending the

interests of Negro workers, particularly in connection with their right to work. This is a solidarity question of the highest order. As matters stand now, the Negro workers, usually the lowest on the seniority lists, the last to be hired and the first to be fired, are being literally swept out of the war plants, and, with few honorable exceptions, the unions are doing very little to protect the Negroes' rights to jobs. Aside from the injustice to the Negroes in this, the danger is that such a situation might enable the employers to drive a wedge between the white and Negro workers, a split which would be a major setback for the entire labor movement. This, the unions must avoid at all costs. If organized labor understands its true interests it will pay triple attention to the burning question of defending the Negroes' right to work and see to it that a due percentage of them are kept in the plants. This will require certain local variations of the seniority system.

Fourthly, under the general head of unifying labor's forces, the A. F. of L. should affiliate to the newly-formed World Federation of Trade Unions, which now has some 70,000,000 members. Such an action would greatly help the workers everywhere in all their fights for better economic and political conditions, including those of American workers. The isolationist attitude of the A. F. of L. top leadership in standing aloof and warring against the W.F.T.U. is intolerable. Their refusal to participate in this great international labor federation because the C.I.O. and the Soviet trade unions are affiliated to it is a scandal and a disgrace. The new W.F.T.U. will be a great buttress to the United Nations and the whole cause of world peace; hence, the organized workers should compel their reactionary leaders to affiliate the A. F. of L. to it.

The Question of Strikes

Throughout the war the workers submitted to the

injustice of the "Little Steel" formula being enforced against them, to the detriment of their living conditions. In a high spirit of patriotism, and being determined to win the war at all costs, the workers loyally lived up to their no-strike pledge and kept the industries in full operation in spite of every provocation from the employers and profound neglect by the government. Their no-strike record was splendid. The total loss of time by war-time strikes was so small that it was more than offset, for example, by the extra time put in by the workers in working



on one single holiday, and they worked on many such holidays during the war.

Now, however, the war is over and labor's no-strike pledge is no longer in force. This does not mean, of course, that the workers should rush helter-skelter into strikes to secure their wage demands. Strikes are very serious actions for workers and should not be undertaken without serious consideration. Workers understand this very well. It is true that a number of strikes have occurred during the present wage movement, provoked by stubborn capitalist resistance to justified wage demands, but the number and extent of these have been grossly exaggerated by the reactionary capitalist press in order to poison public opinion against the labor movement.

One very important thing that the workers should bear carefully in mind in the present wage movement is the need for the broadest and best disciplined solidarity, particularly where strikes are involved. In the face of the highly-organized employers, the unions should generally follow an industry-wide, national wage strategy, instead of attempting to concentrate against this or that individual employer. Also, groups of industries, on the basis of unified demands, should act together. Indeed, the best wage strategy would require that the A. F. of L., C.I.O., Railroad Brotherhoods, Coal Miners and independent labor unions should come together in a national conference and prepare demands for general wage increases for the entire working class.

Where strikes become unavoidable, due to an intransigent attitude on the part of the employers and the Administration, they should be conducted in a resolute and disciplined manner. They should be well-organized, for the trade unions face the most powerful capitalist class in the world. Jurisdictional strikes should be ruled out as sheer poison, for nothing hurts the trade unions more, internally

and in public opinion, than these destructive inner controversies. Wildcat strikes should also be avoided wherever possible. In this respect, however, it must be said that when wildcat strikes occur they are almost always the result of extreme employer provocations and the failure of conservative union leaders to move to protect the interests of the workers concerned. Our labor history has many such "unauthorized" strikes, some of them national in character. The recent New York rank-and-file strike of longshoremen was typical in this respect, of employer provocation and official union inaction. Once in a while, however, as in the recent Hayes-Kelsey auto parts strike in Detroit, Trotskyite and other disrupters managed to pull out workers in conflict with their own interests and with the union's wage policy.

The trade unions must, in this situation, pay close attention to the question of company unionism. Despite the Wagner Act, there are still many company unions in the industries, and the employers, to combat the spread of real trade unionism, will undoubtedly organize many more. Often the workers have illusions about such organizations being helpful to them. In dealing with such unions, therefore, it is not adequate merely to make head-on attacks against them. Particular attention must be paid to winning them from the inside. Recent American labor history is full of instances when company unions were either won over to the labor movement or broken up by the efforts of workers within them to use them as the instruments for achieving their economic demands.

In this period, when the country is anxious to get back to peacetime production, the unions necessarily have to give serious consideration to the question of arbitration as a means of adjusting their demands. But here a sharp warning is very necessary. The workers must be alertly on guard against every attempt to force compulsory ar-

bitration upon them, whether by law, by the pressure of the Administration or by the weight of the reactionary press. The workers must watch out that arbitration does not become just a convenient means for the employers to defeat the demands of the workers. These few words of caution about arbitration must therefore be sounded. First, arbitration must, when entered into, be purely upon a voluntary basis; second, the workers involved should look very carefully at the composition of the arbitration board; and third, it is a good practice to secure as much as possible of their demands beforehand by direct negotiation, referring only the remaining unresolved questions to arbitration.

To facilitate its movement for better wages, the labor movement should insist that the wartime controls over wage increases be removed. Legal limitations on the right to strike, as incorporated in the notorious Smith-Connally Act, should also be done away with. The war is over, and there is no need for the continuance of such restrictive limitations upon the basic rights of the workers.

Labor should insist, however, that price controls must be maintained. This is indispensable. For if the purchasing power of the masses is to be maintained, the highly organized employers must not be allowed to boost prices as they see fit. In years past, when the national interest imperatively demanded it, the government took away from the railroads the right to jack up freight and passenger rates, and it turned the control of such matters over to the Interstate Commerce Commission. In line with this same general principle, the national interest now demands that prices generally shall be kept as low as possible and wages raised to as high levels as are practicable (if we are to avoid the most devastating effects of future economic crises). Hence, a larger government control over prices than has ever existed before in peacetime must be devel-

oped. But, of course, this price control will have to be operated far more in the public interest than has ever been the case with the Interstate Commerce Commission which has always been heavily under the influence of the great railroad kings.

Unity of the Wages and Jobs Struggle

One of the most important lessons that organized labor must fully grasp in the postwar period we are now entering into, if it is to protect the workers' interests successfully, is that the struggle for better wages and the fight to create more jobs for the workers are inseparable. They are both part of one broad general struggle to protect the economic interests of the workers. This is not as simple a proposition as it appears on the surface, and labor must consciously strive to keep the two phases of the general struggle constantly in mind. For if either is neglected, both will suffer.

During many years, in the recurring economic crises, it was a great weakness of A. F. of L. unions to concentrate their attention almost exclusively upon protecting the conditions of the employed workers and to allow the unemployed to shift pretty much for themselves. Indeed, it was as late as 1934 before the A. F. of L. top leaders even began seriously to demand relief and insurance for the unemployed. Such a one-sided policy, of short-sightedly neglecting the welfare of the unemployed of course, in turn, reacted also against the interest of the workers who held jobs.

In the present situation there is definitely a danger of such unwise policies being followed by some unions. Thus, in the big attention being now paid to the burning question of wage increases, there is a distinct tendency to neglect the no less vital matter of the struggle to provide jobs and relief for the unemployed. A proof of this neglect is

to be found in the fact that although the reactionaries in Congress are busily slashing to pieces President Truman's proposals looking toward providing safeguards against the developing unemployment, and his plans for full employment, the unions, with few exceptions, are paying very little attention to the matter.

This is a great weakness. We are now entering into a period of mass unemployment, with the danger of a major economic crisis looming not far ahead for us; hence, at all costs, we should secure the "full employment" legislation now pending in Congress, in the shape of the Murray Bill and President Truman's recommendations. Therefore, as the workers press on for improved wages they must also imperatively demand the enactment into law of the principles of President Roosevelt's Economic Bill of Rights. If this is not done, the future will show that the present wage increases will be largely cancelled out by the pressure of the unemployed upon the labor market.

In this linking together of the fight for better wages and for more jobs, there must also be an organizational tie-up between the trade unions and the unemployed. Under no circumstances should the mistake be made that the unemployed be allowed, as in other times of mass joblessness, to drift away from the trade unions. To prevent this the unions should keep their unemployed members in good standing; they should set up committees to look after their unemployed workers; they should cultivate all necessary forms of organizations of their unemployed; they should participate in all demonstrations and other actions in support of the "full employment" program. The trade unions, breaking sharply with conservative policies of the past, must constantly be conscious of their great task to defend the economic protection of the unemployed and to fight for the maintenance of employment at the highest possible levels.

Unity of the Economic and Political Struggle

In carrying through their present fight for better wages and more jobs the workers must understand, as never before, the need to carry on their struggle upon both the economic and political fields simultaneously. This is a lesson of supreme importance to the workers. Their whole future depends upon the extent to which they grasp it.

The day is gone when the workers could settle their economic and other demands simply by negotiating with the employers, with the government playing only a minor, if any part at all in these negotiations. Today all important economic questions concerning the workers—wages, hours, prices, production, etc.—have become largely political issues of the first magnitude. This was true, not only in the war period that we have just been through but it will also be the case, under different conditions of course, in the peacetime perspective ahead of us. The unions therefore must combine political action with strike action and collective bargaining. The old Gompers slogan "No politics in the unions" is hopelessly out of date. It is not only obsolete, but highly dangerous. Now the workers, on pain of disaster to themselves, must become organized and active politically.

In their political activities the workers must also concern themselves not only with matters dealing directly with their own economic conditions, but also with our whole national and international political life in general. Today the capitalist system of the world is in a deepening crisis, and this crisis gives birth to a host of vital political problems which the workers, along with other democratic forces, must actively help solve. Failure to do this would mean to bring down disaster upon the heads of the workers and the whole people.

The great monopolists, the mainspring of reaction in



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the United States, are determined to still further tighten their grip upon Congress in the elections of 1946. They also want to cripple the trade unions by hostile legislation, of which the Burton-Ball-Hatch Bill is a current example. This situation lays the imperative task upon the shoulders of organized labor to mobilize politically all its own forces and those of its natural allies—farmers, professionals, small businessmen, veterans, etc.—so that the 1946 elections may be made into a great democratic victory for the whole American people.

Organized labor must also bring its great forces politically to bear to block the present drive of American imperialistic forces to dominate the world. This imperialist drive, which has behind it the great monopolies and trusts of this country, is manifest in every phase of our foreign policy—in our failure to take drastic steps to root out fascism in Germany and Japan, in our attempts to dominate the trade of the world, in our maintenance of a gigantic military, naval and air force, including the atomic bomb, in our policy of “getting tough” with the U.S.S.R., etc. Such policies are full of danger to the American people and the world. They point the way to fascism, economic chaos, and another world war. Organized labor, therefore, has the historic task of balking the imperialists’ plans and of influencing our foreign policies in the direction laid down at the famous conferences of Moscow, Teheran, Yalta, San Francisco and Potsdam.

A further, especially urgent reason why labor must pay particular attention to organized political action, is the sharp tendencies of the Truman Administration to surrender to the forces of reaction and imperialism. Although President Truman has pledged himself to carry out the policies laid down by former President Roosevelt, obviously he is not doing so. More and more his policies yield toward reaction, both on the domestic and international

fields. It is a dangerous fact that today in Congress the voice of Herbert Hoover is much more hearkened to than is that of President Truman, both regarding domestic and international policies. Organized labor, therefore, must bestir itself to defeat reaction and to have the broad policies associated with the name of Roosevelt carried into effect. And clearly, from the strength of the drive of the reactionaries, it will require the full strength of labor and its friends to accomplish this purpose.

In the 1944 elections, organized labor, in such organizations as the Political Action Committee of the C.I.O., Legislative Committees in the A. F. of L., etc., worked out the general forms along which the political struggle should be prosecuted. But, reaction on the offensive, organized labor must organize its forces far better and be much more active than it was during the great election struggle of 1944.

Finally, the trade unions must sharply oppose the Rankin House Committee on un-American activities, the resurrected Dies Committee. This committee is a combination of Hitlerian red-baiting, Japanese "dangerous thought" persecution, and Salem witch-hunt. Its purpose is, by creating a fascist-like red-scare, to provide a smoke-screen behind which the power-greedy monopolists can carry on their program of reaction in this country and of imperialist aggression abroad. The Rankin Committee, in the Hitler tradition, starts out by attacking the Communists, but it soon develops its real program, which is to undermine the trade unions and to weaken everything progressive in the United States. Organized labor must not, as often in the past, stand aside and let this imitation Gestapo carry on its activities unmolested. The unions must realize that it is a bread and butter question, involving their whole struggle for wages and jobs, that it is, in fact, a life and death matter for them generally, to

defeat and to force the dissolution of the fascist-breeding Rankin Committee.

The Unity of Labor's and the Nation's Interests

One of the most basic phases of organized labor's wage and job strategy is the necessity of making the people at large realize that the demands of the workers for better wages and adequate jobs is not merely the concern of the workers, but is in the most fundamental interest of the whole nation. For only if the purchasing power of the workers is maintained by providing the workers with jobs and good wages, can the country's great industrial machine be kept in operation.

Of course, organized labor, for many years past, has always tried to win the support of the public behind its demands for better economic conditions for the workers. But this was done largely upon a humanitarian basis. Now, however, the approach must be fundamentally different. The people at large must be made to understand that the demands of organized labor for jobs and better wages are vital to their own interests, and that the alternative is chronic mass unemployment, wholesale prostration of industry and hard times for everybody. By the same token, organized labor must also show the people that its democratic proposals generally are in the national interest.

Very much of organized labor's success in the future will depend upon the degree to which it manages to convince "public opinion" that its program is in the national interest, and to which it succeeds in mobilizing the people generally behind its demands. Unfortunately, however, many labor leaders, particularly those at the top of the A. F. of L. grossly underestimate the necessity of winning to their side the great democratic masses of the American people.

The necessity for winning the broad masses of farmers,

professionals, veterans, small businessmen, etc., to support its program, entails certain heavy responsibilities upon the trade union leadership. For one thing, these leaders will have to think and act more in terms of the national interest, giving particular attention to the specific demands of the other democratic strata of the population. They must also work out practical forms of political cooperation with all these elements in a great national democratic coalition. Local and national conferences with these forces are very much in order. Organized labor must break down the spirit of isolation which has characterized many of its conservative leaders up till now.

Above all, the trade unions must establish good working collaboration with the ex-servicemen and women. The trade unions must become the ardent champions of the legitimate demands of these decisive forces, and work out every practical means of collaboration with them. Especially, the workers must establish labor posts in all the veterans' organizations. Under no circumstances should the N.A.M. and other reactionary employer forces be allowed to succeed in their nefarious scheme of driving a wedge between the war veterans and the workers. That would be a menace to our American democracy, whereas a good working alliance between organized labor and the veterans would be the best guarantee of success in the fight to secure full employment, to strengthen this country's democracy, to maintain world peace and to defeat American reaction's attempt to dominate the world.

The trade unions, in order to tie the workers' interests in tightly with those of other democratic segments of our population, must especially become active in the fight of the masses against rising living costs. They must convince the people at large that the employers are well able to meet the present wage demands of the workers out of their fabulous reserves and current profits, without raising

prices. They must also convince the "public" that the adoption of a full employment program would in itself bring about a huge reduction in production costs, and would enable the granting of still higher wages. In short, the people must be convinced not only that the better utilization of our great industrial machine will allow of higher wages, shorter hours, and lower prices, but also that to achieve these objectives is in the vital interest of the whole American people, save a small minority of monopolists and other exploiters who seem to believe that America was created simply for their private enrichment and to satisfy their love of power.

All this means, necessarily, that the trade unions will have to carry on far more elaborate campaigns of public enlightenment than they have ever done before. The employers fully understand the vital importance of winning public opinion; hence their elaborate campaigns on the radio, in the press, in Congress and elsewhere in support of their reactionary programs. This should be a signal to organized labor to revamp completely its obsolete methods of reaching the people's mind and to adopt modern methods of publicity on a huge scale. Labor must "sell" its case to the people at large as never before.

Tasks in Perspective

The foregoing are some of the most urgent tasks needful to accomplish if organized labor is to win its fight for better wages and more jobs—that is, there must be more unity in the ranks of labor itself, there must be a linking up of the wages and job struggles, there must be a tying together of the economic and political struggles of the workers, and there must be an identification of the demands of labor with the interests of the nation as a whole, and the building up of a great democratic coalition upon the basis of these common interests. The success of organized

labor in the present and the period ahead, the extent to which it achieves better living standards and job protection, will depend upon the measure in which it grasps these elementary lessons of the present situation.

But organized labor must needs go beyond the confines of these immediate tasks. The time is now at hand when the trade unions of this country will have to analyze far more basically the system under which we live than they have ever done before, and to adopt from their analysis, far-reaching social programs of progress.

The world capitalist system is sick, very sick. Proof of this is the fact that capitalism, during the past generation, has given birth to two devastating world wars, to a shattering world economic crisis, and to the deadly disease of fascism. And now, although we have just finished a war that has laid Europe and a large part of Asia in ruins, already the reactionaries are talking glibly of a new world war ahead of us. And the peoples of the capitalist world, famished and destitute, are now looking with terror towards new economic crises and mass unemployment in their war-ravaged countries.

The tortured and impoverished masses of Europe and Asia, in the midst of wrecked cities, ruined industries and collapsed political systems, are taking emergency methods to protect themselves under the tottering capitalist system, by nationalizing the banks and basic industries, by breaking up the big landed estates, and by democratizing their governments. But more and more they are getting their eyes fastened upon the real social evil, the capitalist system itself. Nor will they rest content until they have finally abolished capitalism altogether, and, through the establishment of Socialism, bring about the socialization of the great means of production and the abolition of the exploitation of man by man for profits' sake. For Socialism is the only means by which peace, democracy and

prosperity can be guaranteed, both on a national and international scale. The existence of the U.S.S.R. has demonstrated this great historical fact.

The American social system, despite all its present seeming strength, is a blood brother to the decaying capitalist system of Europe and Asia, and it is subject to the same basic laws of economic and political development that have flung the old world capitalism into its present ruinous plight. Our country, too, is involved in the deepening general crisis of capitalism. American workers, therefore, must necessarily start to study our capitalism through and through and, in the light of Marxist-Leninist science, begin to orientate upon the Socialist perspective that is becoming so obviously needed in the rest of the world.

The United States is very rich in natural resources, in great industries, and in trained manpower—the wealth-producing capacity of which will be enormously increased by the development of atomic power. But the greed of the monopolists—with their program of low wages and restricted production—stands in the way of realizing the potential well-being of the masses that our national wealth and industrial development make possible. By organizing their forces thoroughly, the workers and their allies can, under capitalism, win for themselves a measure of well-being, a degree of protection against the recurrent economic crises. But only under Socialism, with the social means of production owned by the whole people, will America realize its great historical dream and become truly an unsurpassed land of liberty, peace and well-being.

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