PHILADELPHIA TAXICABS

By SOL AUERBACH

TRANSPORTATION is a key industry because of its importance to distribution of products and to travel. Taxicabs catering only to passenger service can be considered as a special part of the transportation industry. The highly concentrated monopoly of transportation in Philadelphia by the Mitten interests and the extension of those interests to other cities, the development of an inter-city Mitten-controlled buss system, and the extension of the Mitten power through the financial grasp of his bank, all point to a small group transportation monopoly that may include railroads too. As a result of this increasing trustification the workers have suffered and will continue to suffer.

The last few years in the Philadelphia taxicab business show many symptoms of the beginning of such trustification. Mitten, after breaking the carmen's strike and forcing them into a company union, has not released his controlling hand. With the purpose of controlling all transportation in Philadelphia he began to appropriate the taxi interests by buying out the smaller companies. Two years ago he purchased the largest, The Yellow Taxi Company, and a year later he bought out his only rival, the Quaker City Taxi Company. At present he controls all the taxi interests, except a few independent cabs. Recently he has also acquired the new subways at a ridiculously low rental from the city. He is master of transportation in Philadelphia, with strong controlling interests in other cities.

The Yellow Taxi Company Drivers.

Having worked for some time for the Yellow Taxi Company in Philadelphia I know something about the conditions under which the drivers work. A study of the conditions of work, the spirit of the workers, from the point of view of organization, is necessary in order to answer capitalist monopoly and prepare the workers for resistance to its crushing power; the answer at present is organization of a militant drivers' union.

The drivers of the Yellow Cab Co. of Philadelphia are supposed to work on ten hour shifts. The ten hours are counted from the time the cab leaves the garage until the time it arrives and the driver checks in. The time taken in filling and repairing is not counted. When a cab goes wrong while out on the streets the driver loses these few hours of potential earnings. There are four hours between the two shifts of the one cab and the drivers usually use them out between themselves. Many of the regular shifts work twelve, thirteen or fourteen hours and this of course is not discouraged by the company since it means so much more profit. There is a special shift known as the "two to nothing shift" awarded to those married men who are willing to slave their skins off to earn a few extra dollars. This shift leaves at two in the morning and can remain on the streets as long as it wishes to.

The employees are paid purely on a commission basis, at the rate of 33 1/3% of the total fares. This is a simple way of manipulating a speed-up system. The longer the drivers are on the streets, the faster they are, the readier they are to take all insults from riders and submissively cater to them, the larger i their pay. At the time I worked, although it was an especially busy season due to the Sesquicentennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, the average pay was about twenty dollars, and I think that is a high estimate. The tips can be figured at an average of half of the salary, making an average earning of thirty dollars per week for from twelve to fourteen hours of work a day and six full days a week. While it is true that some drivers earned as high as forty or forty-five dollars per week they achieved this paradise by working fifteen or sixteen hours a day for the seven days of the week.

The work is far from pleasant. In all weather, the worse the weather the more business on the streets, in cabs that would not always run, always forced to be pleasant and polite to riders, no matter how cranky or unruly they may be, always lookin out for the tip at the end of the ride (many times being left flat), depending upon the generosity of the customers for one third or more of the earnings, watched by company inspectors who ride around in their "crueler wagons" ready to report all misdemeanours such as smoking in the cab, reading a newspaper, sitting in back of the cab, "laying" with running motor, etc., heckled by the merit system which makes docile slaves out of the men for the sake of a few dollars bonus at Christmas time, like other job holders the taxi-drivers are kept in bondage by a severe economic system, ruled by their bosses.

Difficulties to be met in organization.

1. Mitten Collaboration Tactics. Mitten is perhaps the arch collaboration hero of American capital-

ism in transportation. His famous car-men's company union and his recent agreement with W. D. Mahon, president of the Amalgamated Ass'n of Street Electric Railways Employes, besides showing up the capitalist composition of supposedly labor leaders, also shows how easily unwary workers can be fooled into submission. He has wound the treacherous bonds of capitalism intricately into the very lives of the workers. He induces them to invest their savings in his bank, using their money to draw his bonds tighter in the form of further investments and by a spreading monopoly involving more workers. He induces the workers to believe that they actually have a share in the management by putting the most docile of them on various company committees. He bluffs them into believing that they share in the profits of their own labor by selling stock to them and paying dividends. By a few miserly dollars a year he has succeeded in creating in his workers petty bourgeois psychology, and accompanying submission to all sorts of degrading conditions. The worker who comes in line in front of Mittens' Bank to invest his slight savings and pay for his stock is only throwing fuel at his own burning-stake. This psychology must be counteracted by intensive propaganda, the workers must be inspired to the realization of their own importance and their key position, and they must be made to see the falseness of the collaboration tactic as far as they are concerned. It is a one-sided collaboration—profitable only to the bosses.

2. The Company bourgeoisifying propaganda At the very beginning of employment in the Yellow Cab Co., and even before pay is received, the prospective drivers are submitted to a few days of business-making propaganda. They are told that they are salesmen, that they must sell transportation, that the only way they can make good is to go and get it, 'the best man wins." They are lectured on the essentials of etiquette, and the all-prevading money-making power of politness (submission to the will of the public). This preparatory advice instills the competitive spirit, the driver with this advice still clinging to him finds when he rolls the streets for "business." Fellow workers become enemies in the rush for riders—many times cutting out other cabs who were hailed from the curb and in other ways stealing riders. The training acquired in the company school and in the struggle for fares, the conditions of their work, make for and enhance the competitive spirit The driver is made to feel from the first like a petty bourgeois, with a store on wheels, out to get as much as he can and to let his fellow worker do the best he can.

The competitive spirit is strengthened by the individual character of the work. The drivers working singly are not trained in cooperation. Especially when times are bad is the individual character of the work exaggerated and the struggle for a living made sharper. The dependence on tips also makes for a more individual spirit, since the driver depends upon his own direct appeal to the public for more earnings.

The espionage system, in the form of inspectors who ride all over the city watching the workers for the company, always ready to report attempts at organization, is a tremendous retarding influence. When an attempt was made in the fall of 1926 to organize the Quaker and Yellow Cab drivers the inspectors were on the job, busily taking the numbers of the cabs, with the result that all those active and participating in the attempted organization were immediately fired.

The Blacklist

A further incident of the mollifying tactic of the Mitten Management may here be in order. When I wrote up my experiences as a Yellow Cab driver which appeared in The Nation (March 9, 1927) I immediately received a letter from Dr. Mitten (the elder Mitten's son) telling me that he was very much interested in my criticism and that he would like to see me. When I appeared he wanted me to act as an adviser for the Yellow Cab Company in introducing certain "reforms," offering me a salary of $150 a month for a few hours work a week. The offer was too evidently a bribe and I of course refused it. Later when I met one of the assistant managers of a company garage he told me that as soon as my article appeared a notice had been sent around to all garages with my picture, ordering that I should not be rehired.

In spite of all these difficulties to be met in organization it is important to organize the drivers. An active propaganda campaign to open the eyes of the workers to the reality of their position will have good results. Taxi drivers are active and if their militant spirit is directed in the proper channels can be organized into a militant union. The dangerous propaganda of class collaboration, the enslaving power of company banks and stocks, the false competition spirit instilled in the drivers must be investigated by simple and straight analysis. That will directly reach the workers. The cab division of the Mitten System is its weakest point because the cab-drivers have not yet been drawn into company unionism. They offer a good starting point in an attack on Mitten-softened class bondage.