Our Timid Progressives
By Earl R. Browder

BENJAMIN STOLBERG writes, in Hearst's International for March, in an article entitled “The Mouse That Frightens Hughes,” about the left-wing movement in the trade unions. He comes to the conclusion that the left wing has done “irreparable damage to the American labor movement by driving all the liberals and progressives in it under cover of the official oligarchy.” This is interesting, if true, and as the judgment is not confined to Brother Stolberg, nor original with him, it may be worth while to examine its validity.

Brother Ben has a superficial keenness in observing facts, and a certain honesty in setting down some of them, that is commendable. Who, for example, could better describe what is happening with our timid progressives than does Ben, when he points out that they are all getting “under cover of the official oligarchy?” And how many of them are honest enough to admit it? Stolberg’s article, therefore, has some merit in these respects, even though on the whole it records a contemptible cowardice on the part of the “progressives” and liberals in the American labor movement.

It is true that most of the so-called progressives have run to cover of the official oligarchy. They have frantically broken away from all commitments not 100% “official.” Some of them have even gone Wm. J. Burns a point better in denouncing the left wing. They have been frightened by something, quite evidently, and Stolberg says that red-flag-waving and Bolshevik ritual is the “mouse” that caused our progressives to run to Mamma Gompers’ arms. If that were true, it would constitute a most damning indictment of reality, the first peep at which was given them when they saw the left-wing militants actually fighting for the things the “progressives” had talked for. Suddenly it was apparent that Amalgamation, the Labor Party, and other mild measures of progress could easily be achieved by those who said they were for them, provided only a little fighting spirit was displayed, with a willingness to accept a responsible and leading part by the progressives. But it meant a real break, not the old platonic sham-battle, with the Gompers bureaucracy. The glimpse of reality was too much for the progressives; they ran shrieking in fear back to the maternal shelter. They never meant really to get away from home; they were out only for an evening’s lark, for a bit of harmless sporting, with everything perfectly respectable the next day. They could not bear to be taken seriously.

There is one fundamental trouble with these progressive friends of ours—they want progress only if they can get it for nothing. They will not pay any price for it. In fact, they become as indignant at a suggestion of risking anything in a fight, as they do at a suggestion that they are not genuine progressives. But sadly it must be recorded, that these timid progressives are not progressives at all. Always, when they come up squarely against a situation that calls for decision and action, the only real test of progressivism, they halt, waver, and run away. They fly to the “cover of the official oligarchy.” They make the same decision that Ben Stolberg makes in his article: “Gompers is right.” Their progressivism is a fake.

There must be, however, a deeper reason for
the wholesale flight of the progressive chickens to
Gompers' sheltering wings, other than merely a
fan-reaction away from the primitive stirrings of
the rank and file and away from all positive
action. That more fundamental explanation is to
be found in the growing bitterness of the class
struggle, in the crisis now developing within the
capitalist system, which draws the class
lines ever tighter. Our "progressives" who are
now progressing backward do not want to be on
either side of the barricade; they want to be on
friendly terms with the whole world; but the fight
has grown too hot, so they choose—capitalism
and its agents in the persons of Gompers, Lewis, et al.

Stolberg merely voices the infantile judgment of
this whole class of progressives, when he sides
with Lewis against the left wing of the Miners' Union. The Progressive Committee was organ-
ized in the U. M. W. A., he complains, although
that is already an industrial union; but the left
wing "hates and distrusts the ruthless tactics of
President Lewis. This reason is as inadequate
as it is foolish, for Lewis is a bad man to be
against."

Brother Stolberg should know (if he does not) that the left wing is not against Lewis because he
is ruthless—it is because he is ruthless against
the militant membership of his own union but
soft as mush to the coal operators. It is because
he ruthlessly adopts the employers' program of
exterminating 200,000 members of his own union,
while he softly whispers his confidences into the
ears of the Civic Federation, President Coolidge,
and Wm. J. Burns. "Lewis is a bad man to be
against" says Stolberg, and his liberal friends
approve. Gary is a bad man to be against, also,
but if one is not against Gary then one is against
the steel workers; and if the left wing is not
against Lewis, then it is against the best fighters
in the miners' organization, against Howat, Mc-
Lachlan, the West Virginia militants, the battled
of Fayette County, the unionists of Herrin. Lewis
uses the same argument: "The Coal Kings are bad
men to be against," and so he joins them. The
timid progressives may be willing to allow Lewis
to sell out the industrial union of the miners, and
to crush the militant rank and file, but the real
progressives within the United Mine Workers
will spit upon such progressivism.

Inner-Union Struggle is the Class Struggle

Struggle between the official oligarchy at the
head of the trade unions and the militant section
of the membership is becoming more bitter, not
because anyone has decreed that it be so, but be-
cause the struggle between the working class and
the capitalist class is becoming more intense. Un-
employment is increasingly entering American in-
dustry again, and with it comes the pressure by
the employers to reduce wages, destroy union
safeguards, and break down unionism generally.
The official oligarchy in the unions is more than
ever afraid of struggle against the employers, be-
cause the membership is more conscious of its
interests than before; the officials are more than
ever subservient to the employers, because they
are more afraid of the rank and file. As a result,
in almost every industry where unemployment is
being felt, the union officials are giving way to
the employers.

It is precisely in the mining industry and the
needle trades that unemployment is most felt to-
day. It is in these two industries that the officials
are surrendering most to the employers. This is
the reason, which Stolberg cannot see, why the
left wing is more active in these two "advanced"
sections of the labor movement than in other more
backward ones; with the added stimulus that the
membership of the needle trades and coal mining
are the most active and class-conscious sections of
the working class. The inner-union struggle is
a primary fact in the class struggle, because the
workers find it impossible to attack the employ-
ning class while the union bureaucracy stands in
the way. If the official oligarchy protects capitalism
against the workers, then the class struggle will
inevitably find its first expression in struggle
against this union officialsdom and its treachery.

Good-Bye to Fake Progressives

Timid progressives, who have been scared away
from all progressive measures because the wicked
Communists insist upon fighting for them also,
will probably have to be allowed to go their way.
The loss is not so great as some may imagine.
They made a great show of strength in times past,
but it was all a bluff. They had no intentions, at
any time, of really doing anything serious in the
way of progressive action—they were but progres-
sive talkers. Let them but get one touch of real-
ity, of the bitter conflict of classes fighting for
control of society, and they scatter and run for the
sheltering wings of their guardians, the Com-
pers, the Lewises, the Johnstons, and the whole
tribe of official oligarchy.

For the real progressives, the revolutionists and
Communists who take progress seriously and fight
for it, the result is on the whole a good one. It
clears away much misunderstanding. It takes
away a rotten support upon which we, to our own
danger, might lean in a more critical moment.
We know more precisely our own strength, which
is the first step toward making the effective fight
for industrial unionism, the Labor Party, and the
other measures necessary for any progress toward
the emancipation of the working class.