

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 the progressives; it would convict them of an immaturity, a timidity of shadows, that would make all their pretensions profoundly ridiculous.

It is not true, however, that the panic-stricken

progressives are running away from shadows. Stolberg maligns them. They are frightened 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 fear-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 entire 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 organized 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 foolhardy, 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, McLachlan, the West Virginia militants, the battlers 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 because the struggle between the working class and the capitalist class is becoming more intense. Unemployment 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, because 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 officialdom is giving way to the employers.

It is precisely in the mining industry and the needle trades that unemployment is most felt today. 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 employing 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 officialdom 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 progressive *talkers*. Let them but get one touch of reality, of the bitter conflict of classes fighting for control of society, and they scatter and run for the sheltering wings of their guardians, the Gomperses, 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.