

# Lessons of the Terre Haute General Strike

By F. BROWN

**T**HE forty-eight hour General Strike of the workers of Terre Haute, which completely paralyzed the industry and transportation of that city, was an admirable example of the energy of the American working class and of its determination to struggle against the insulting despotism of the bosses. The strength of the working class in the coming struggles was clearly indicated in this strike.

It is of the utmost importance to estimate this strike and draw its lessons not only for the American working class, and specifically for the Terre Haute workers, but also and especially for the Party. From the experiences gained in such struggles as the Terre Haute and San Francisco General Strikes, and from the numerous other battles that have taken place throughout the country in recent years,

the working class is able to improve its weapons of struggle and steel itself for future battles.

### **What Are the Outstanding Features in the Terre Haute Struggle?**

First, the indignation of the workers at the attempt of the bosses of the Columbia Enameling and Stamping Company to open the plant under the protection of armed guards rose to the point where they went out on General Strike. The significant lesson here is the fact that the locals of the A. F. of L. went on record so rapidly for the General Strike, and the marvelous initiative displayed by the workers in going from plant to plant, completely paralyzing the life of this industrial city.

Second, there was a complete tie-up, involving all categories of workers in the city, from industries to communications, and for the first time in recent history, both morning and afternoon press were silenced. In this regard the Terre Haute workers went a step beyond the San Francisco workers. In San Francisco, due to the legalistic approach of the typographical workers, the bourgeois press was permitted during the entire course of the strike to vomit its lies against the working class, trying with the most venomous intrigues to split the ranks of the workers.

Third, the masses immediately built up strong picket lines, involving not only the striking workers, but practically the whole working population of Terre Haute, which showed the most splendid militancy when confronted with the brutal attacks of the National Guard, which used bayonets and gas against men, women and children, indiscriminately.

Fourth, the General Strike in Terre Haute immediately developed sympathy strikes of the miners of the county who understood that the struggle of the workers of the Columbia Enameling and Stamping Co., and the struggles of the Terre Haute workers were their struggles.

These are the main positive achievements of this marvelous action of the workers of Debs' city, which show the determination of the masses to struggle, when necessary, over the heads of the bureaucratic reformist officials of the American Federation of Labor, who by their continuous compromises with the ruling class not only prevent the organization of the great masses, but hold back the struggle of the masses, or as in a number of cases, openly betray the struggle of the masses in the interests of the ruling class.

The struggle in Terre Haute is not yet ended. The workers of the Columbia Enameling and Stamping Co. are still out. The masses of Terre Haute will give a new demon-

stration of their willingness to maintain their unions, to defeat the bosses, by marching on Labor Day as a solid body, ready for new battles.

In Omaha the masses of the rank and file, learning from the Frisco, Toledo and Terre Haute strikes marvelous examples of struggle, are sharpening their weapons. New and more powerful strikes will be witnessed in many industrial centers, and no intrigues and lies of the rotten, yellow Hearst press will succeed in checking the advance of the American working class which is throwing off its excess baggage of belief and trust in the two-party system, in a so-called "democratic" administration, which more and more appears in its real form as a government of monopoly; in the top bureaucracy of the American Federation of Labor leaders who instead of leading the workers to victory, continue to lead them into ambushes, and, as in the case of the miners, compromising and postponing their struggles from month to month, trying to break their energy, their will to struggle.

It is in order better to prepare the masses for the next struggles which will in many places take on the character of general strikes, that the experiences of the Terre Haute strike must be studied and analyzed—that the main weaknesses must be brought to light, in order to prevent future errors.

### The Weaknesses in Terre Haute

What are the main weaknesses that we must bring before the masses in the form of lessons for the coming struggles, not only to the Indiana workers but to the workers throughout the country?

1. That in Terre Haute **no real large strike committee was built.** The strike committee which did exist remained a narrow one which did not take steps to broaden itself by drawing in delegates from the various unions. The fact that Taylor was able to call off the strike shows that the strike committee did not consult the masses, that such a decision was made behind closed doors, among a few officials, over the heads of the strikers. It shows that the strike committee because of its narrow character did not see, did not understand, that one of its first moves should have been to make itself known to the masses as the real leader of the strike, as the only instrument, elected by the organized workers, to conduct the strike, carry on negotiations, etc. Here from these facts we draw the lesson that a strike committee must be a broad one, composed of the elected delegates of the various locals of the organized workers, because only a broad strike committee can divide the various functions during a general strike, can assign able



forces to take care of the various phases of struggle (as, for example, the taking care of the supply of food during a general strike), that will make itself known to the masses, will meet regularly, legally, semi-legally or completely illegally depending upon the situation, reporting day by day to the masses through the various delegates, consulting the masses, leading the masses day by day, minute by minute.

2. Because of the non-existence of a broad strike committee, no strike bulletin was issued continuously to guide the struggle and direct the strikers day by day, as well as the activities needed to carry on this struggle. In Terre Haute, by the printers joining the Central Strike, a step forward was made in comparison with San Francisco, by taking away from the hands of the bosses a weapon that would have been utilized through the bourgeois press to start a red hysteria and a campaign against the strike on the question of shortage of food and other nonsense.

Yet, while the bourgeois press was suppressed by the strike of the printers, while this weapon was taken away from the hands of the bosses, the strike committee did not see the necessity of issuing their own paper, a strike bulletin. It is through a strike bulletin that in time of General Strike, directives are given to the masses; that in periods of negotiations the masses are kept informed and consulted; that the lies of the bourgeois press in the surrounding towns and nationally, are answered; that the official decisions of the strike committee based upon the consultation with the masses are announced. In this way, it can be seen that the actual outcome of the strike depends upon whether such a strike bulletin is issued, either legally or in another form.

Taylor was able to use the radio because the breaking of the strike was in the interest of the bosses and the government, yet the radio would not have been available for the strikers if the strike committee would have tried to utilize it by giving directives to the workers on how better to unite their forces, and to improve their struggle. This argument again proves the importance of a strike bulletin.

### The Role of a General Strike Committee

A real strike committee, in a case such as Terre Haute, where as soon as the General Strike was called the National Guard was rushed in and martial law declared, should have immediately issued an appeal to the National Guardsmen imported from Indianapolis and other towns, pointing out to their fellow-workers in uniform that they were being used as instruments in breaking the struggle of their own Terre Haute brothers and in this way helping the bosses. As in the case of Terre Haute where the General Strike was 100

per cent successful, not only the strike committee should have issued a call to the imported National Guardsmen, **but the National Guardsmen of Terre Haute themselves who were not in the uniform of duty, but in the "uniform" of workers fighting for a cause—the cause of the workers in uniform as well—should have issued a call exposing before the workers in uniform the old trick of the bourgeoisie in putting workers against workers in the name of the interests of the "country" which coincides with the interests of Wall Street, of the bosses, and (in the case of Terre Haute) with the despots of the Columbia Enameling and Stamping Co. and the government authorities.**

A real broad strike committee would have seen the necessity of sending out forces to all the neighboring towns to get the organized support of the population in demanding the withdrawal of the National Guard, and to force this through sympathy strikes. It should have appealed to all American Federation of Labor unions in the State of Indiana to support the strike and create a powerful movement that would have forced the authorities to withdraw the National Guard and martial law. The example given by the miners shows that just one word of appeal would have been answered by the masses in the neighboring counties.

### **Organized Rank and File Leadership a Prerequisite**

Why all these weaknesses? To what were the weaknesses of the strike committee due? First, to the lack of real far-seeing leadership, rich in experience—if not personal experience, at least the general experience of the labor movement gained from following and studying the history of the movement and the struggles of labor. This is due primarily not only to the weakness of our Party in Terre Haute, but to the absence of a rank and file trade union movement, moving along class lines. While in San Francisco, the Communists were the driving force, which together with the rank and file movement, brought about a general strike over the heads of the bureaucrats, which was able to carry on despite continuous attacks, in Terre Haute we find a spontaneous movement of the masses that lacked a determined leadership. The whole movement of Terre Haute is indeed a movement of the rank and file, but without clear vision; and this is again due to the weakness of our Party and the non-existence of an organized rank and file movement of the forces of class struggle.

The few officials that agreed under the pressure of Taylor, the A. F. of L. representative, to end the strike cannot be considered as traitors, cannot be put in the same category with the Greens and Ryans, cannot be considered in the same light as the A. F. of L. top officialdom, as people

that work hand in hand with the bosses. The mistake committed by the leaders of the strike, by these fellow workers, flows from their reformist ideology which led them into believing that the government arbitrators, the representatives of Roosevelt, would have solved the situation in favor of the strikers. These fellow workers that were leading the strike committed the mistake of allowing themselves to put their faith in the hands of the government arbitrators, in the emissaries of Green, instead of in the admirable strength of their Terre Haute brothers and in the support given to this struggle by the Indiana workers, and the workers of the country as a whole.

A number of trade union officials in Terre Haute today understand that the calling off of the strike was an error. This strike is a big lesson for them, and we must help them to learn it thoroughly. The struggle in Terre Haute is not yet ended. The workers of the Columbia Enameling and Stamping Company plant are negotiating (this is already a partial victory); yet they must go on, compel the withdrawal of the National Guard and the end of martial law. Our immediate problem today is to mobilize the trade unions all over the State of Indiana in support of the Columbia Enameling and Stamping Company strikers. Not only there, but in Chicago where there is a strong A. F. of L. movement, where the rank and file movement plays a substantial role, steps must immediately be taken, to mobilize the support of the A. F. of L. unions by demanding the support of the A. F. of L. unions for the strikers of the Columbia Enameling and Stamping Co., by demanding the end of martial law and the withdrawal of the troops, by expressing solidarity with the fine struggle conducted by their Terre Haute brothers. The Terre Haute unions must force a hearing from the Labor Department on the evidence that the National Guard is being used to break the strike. An immediate campaign for relief should be launched by the unions of Terre Haute and in the trade union movement of Indiana and Illinois.

In the development of a broad movement of solidarity of the masses of Indiana, Illinois, and the other neighboring states, as well as nationally, the Terre Haute strikers, who do not feel defeated but who are preparing for new struggles, will rally all their energies to smash the insolence of the Terre Haute bosses. While developing the solidarity movement we must continuously expose the role of the arbitrators as the tools of the ruling class.

### **Build Labor Party in Terre Haute**

The General Strike in Terre Haute is a real lesson for the workers of Terre Haute and the whole country. The



problem of a labor and farmer party which would embrace workers, farmers, intellectuals, professionals, etc.—the only means through which the exploited American people will check the arrogance of a small ruling minority, and check the advance of fascism which manifests itself in more brutal exploitation by monopoly capital—becomes more and more a vital issue. In the city of Debs where the working class is 100 per cent organized and so strongly imbued with the revolutionary traditions of the American working class, the building of a powerful labor-farmer party would give a splendid example to the masses all over Indiana.

One of the most important tasks before the Communist Party in Indiana is the building of the Party in Terre Haute, utilizing especially the few forces in Terre Haute. This means that the Party in Indiana must definitely recruit numbers of militant workers among the organized masses in the A. F. of L. unions, and must build the Party in the factories. In Terre Haute there are not just ten or twenty potential Communists, there are hundreds and thousands—all the splendid fighters of the General Strike. The problem is to get them into our ranks, to develop a real rank and file movement, to build a broad united front of Communists, Socialists, trade union workers, professionals and intellectuals on a common platform of struggle for the democratic rights of the workers, against the Terre Haute Hitlers.

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