The Railway Employees’ Department Convention

By Wm. Z. Foster

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FROM the standpoint of constructive work, the convention of the Railway Employees’ Department, recently held in Chicago, was an almost complete failure. This was because it neither understood the supreme need of railroad labor, nor did anything to satisfy that need. With railroad workers nowhere above all is the solidification of their ranks, a unifying of their forces so that they may make effective resistance to the powerfully organized employers. But to bring about this vital measure the convention did virtually nothing. Judging it by results accomplished, it was a standpat, visionless gathering which refused even to express a desire for real solidarity.

But, strange to say, if the convention achieved little or nothing in a constructive way, it nevertheless displayed a great volume of radical sentiment. From first to last there was a strong minority, which on a couple of occasions actually became the majority, fighting steadily and consistently, if not always wisely and effectively, to strengthen the bonds between the affiliated organizations and to draw them into amalgamation.

In fact the business of the convention was little else than a constant struggle between this minority seeking to progress on towards industrial unionism, and the international officials striving to maintain the present craft alignments. It was a case of industrialism versus craftism. Over it the battle between the two forces raged ceaselessly and manifested itself in every conceivable fashion. It was the bone of contention in the discussions on such questions as the election of new classes of officers, raising of per capita tax, jurisdiction, amalgamation, admission of unions, strike votes, and dozens of others. It pervaded everything, made all issues. And the worst of the thing was that upon almost every issue the industrialists lost and the craftists won. That, however, displayed a great volume of radical sentiment.

Another battle raged around the question of increasing the per capita tax paid by the international to the Department. The proposal was to increase it to 10 cents. This was another instance of the organization’s lack of personnel. The proposal was defeated only by an arithmetical system of voting by craft units. The six important crafts split three and three on it, but two delegates, one casting the vote of the whole Clerk’s organization, and the other of the Switchmen’s, fixed the final vote three for and five against. The thing was lost.

Another battle raged around the question of whether the ranks of the railroad workers should be open to any who is going to affiliate with this Department. The convention decided that it would admit the Maintenance of Way forthwith. This, however, was far from being a majority vote. The progressives were able to make their major-
The Amalgamation Scare

From the opening day of the convention it was apparent that amalgamation of the many railroad unions would be one of the most important issues of the convention. To be considered were the delegates, most of whom realized the imperative necessity of doing something to greatly strengthen the unions, were full of the subject. They talked of it, and they fought it, and they swept it all before them. The Jewell Administration amendment was overwhelmingly beaten and the original resolution providing for a national strike vote unanimously adopted. It was the one victory of the rebellious spirit of the convention, and it was a veritable triumph.

The General Strike Vote

All through the convention the reports of the committees and speeches of the delegates were replete with details of how seriously the organization is suffering under the "open shop" attacks of the companies. This, in fact, was the basis of the strong radical sentiment prevailing. Most of the delegates realized that the unions were in danger and they were eager for almost anything that would solidify and strengthen them. A streak of desperation ran through all the convention's proceedings.

In their determination to fight and to fight again, and to keep the railroad workers from being scapegoats on those who were on strike. The sentiment was overwhelmingly for a united stand against the common enemy. So strong was this that not even the International Presidents dared oppose it. For the most part they confined themselves to straddling and to pointing out the difficulties of attempting a national strike, and to scab upon those that were on strike. This spirit was the more noteworthy in view of the fact that fully 95% of the delegates were paid officials, system chieftains, each representing anywhere from 80,000 to 700,000 employees.

The amendment was obligingly made by a delegate. But the convention reacted violently against it. They would have none of its policy of taking the road to the convention, and the delegates who should consider them sacred, was laughed out of court. It was, indeed, the dire warning issued of the sad consequences to the men if they allowed the roads merely to the roads affected. Hence Knudsen and the writer made addresses on amalgamation of the eight trades affiliated to the convention.

Mr. Woll, to the convention to campaign against the League. Ostensibly Mr. Woll was to advocate amalgamation, but in reality he spent over $600 per month. If such high-paid officials were in this mood it may well be imagined what was the state of mind of the rank and file of workers on the roads. The International would strongly exert all their power and influence to keep the convention from running away from them. On nearly every important issue the President, who are usually reluctant to speak, had to take the floor to hold the delegates in check. So standpoint was their attitude and so unpopular did they become, that their appearance on the floor was usually greeted with the same attitude of the Pennsylvania, New York Central, Erie, Western Maryland and many other railroads, the Executive Council presented a resolution providing for the taking of a national strike vote of the six shop trades as a means to put a stop to the "farming out" of the institution of pinework, the establishment of company unions, and the many other measures used by the companies in their militant efforts to destroy the unions and to reduce the workers to servitude.

From the beginning it was evident that a strike vote would be carried. The only question was what kind of strike vote it would be, a sectional or general one. After reviewing the hostile attitude of the Pennsylvania, New York Central, Erie, Western Maryland and many other railroads, the Executive Council presented a resolution providing for the taking of a national strike vote of the six shop trades if the grievances complained of could not be straightened out at the close of the convention.

This radical proposal did not suit the Administration and they immediately began to war against it. Their plan was to confine the strike to the delegates. Hence Jewell himself pleaded with the convention for an amendment to that end, saying:

"I am going to earnestly suggest to this convention that the second resolution of this body be amended so that the strike ballot be submitted to the membership on the several railroad organizations. In other words, instead of the taking of this strike vote, be involved in the conditions complained of in the whereof of this resolution."

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I HAVE just read No. 3 of The Labor Herald. It is the most stirring reading that has come to my eyes in many long months. I can't resist the temptation to say that the quality of it is astonishing—astonishing to me, who expected much of it. The startling thing about it is its complete success in getting away from "dead matter," or "boiled-down," or "dried out," or, and what is perhaps more noteworthy, its plastic adjustment to the entire gamut of national Labor Union events and situations of the day.

The first article on the Coal Strike is such a relief from the interest of unenlightening newswriting that I've been reading— it is informative. Then the same gist is kept up all the way through, in fact, the lucidity of the stuff increases with each page. Knisell's stuff makes a man know a lot of things about the Metal Trades that he didn't know before—interesting things that you like to remember. 

The report from The Labor Herald is a consistent point of view upon all of the labor events as they occur, makes it a thing to be wondered about. "I keep asking myself how it happened. Yes— there wasn't anything but a desert of half-dead, unconnected, meaningless "labor" or "LABOR" stuff left; and the great industries of steel, mines, and railroads, are owned by exactly the same financial interests, they should recognize the need for one common fight against the common enemy. But still the unions seem not to have learned their interests are class interests, not craft interests.

Such a shameful situation cannot be accepted without protest. The solidarity with the miners should be raised in every local and the local railroad councils should get their organizations unitedly to refuse to handle coal.

FOSTER MAKES WESTERN TRIP

BEGINNING early in July, the secretary of the Trade Union Educational League will make a trip through the West, covering the principal cities. He will lecture on "The Crisis in the American Labor Movement." If your city has not received a date for a meeting, write the League, and an effort will be made to arrange such a meeting. The routing will be closed within two weeks.

AN OPINION OF THE LABOR HERALD

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