Metal Trades Amalgamation in Great Britain

By Wm. Ros. Knudsen

WHILE recently in England I found it interesting to compare the labor movement and leadership there with our American product. On this side of the water we suffer a tribe of “labor leaders” who lead only in reaction and know little of labor except as the source of their salaries. The British labor leader, on the other hand, while conservative and capitalistic, is of another type altogether—the kind that we submit to in America is totally unknown there and would not be tolerated for a moment.

The metal trades unions of the two countries show this difference clearly. In America it is only the occasional and exceptional official “leader” that advocates amalgamation; while in Great Britain almost all the leaders are working to bring about this measure of solidarity. In this country we are struggling hard with a purely rank-and-file movement to get amalgamation adopted in principle by the metal trades; in England the process of actually fusing the unions together is going on and has made great headway.

The Amalgamated Engineering Union is the name of the industrial union of the metal trades in Great Britain. It was formed by an amalgamation of the craft unions of brass finishers, coppersmiths, fitters and millwrights, turners and rolliners, patternmakers, blacksmiths and helpers, machinists, machine joiners, electrical workers, and engineers, scientific instrument makers, draftsmen, drop hammerers and forgers, etc. The unions that are uniting to form the Amalgamated Engineering Union of 300,000 members are:


North of England Brass Turners, Fitters, and Finishers’ Society, Amalgamated Society of Scale, Beam, and Weighing Machine Makers, United Brass Founders and Finishers’ Society, London United Brass Founders’ Society. There are still a number of fairly large organizations that will still control the working class, the rest are helpless in the grasp of the exploiters. The great steel, textile, automobile, meat packing, rubber, coal mining, lumber, and general manufacturing industries are either completely unorganized or possess only the weakest and most fragmentary unions. Even in those industries where labor has been successful, such as coal mining, printing, building, railroad, general transportation, clothing, leather, amusements, etc., the degree of unionism in no case exceeds 30%, and in most instances it is far less. This is an impossible situation. The handful of organized workers cannot accomplish anything substantial with such a gigantic army of unorganized ar- rayed against them. The further progress of the American working class, politically as well as industrially, depends upon the organization of the mass of unorganized workers into the trade unions.

An Opportunity and a Warning

The present time presents an exceptionally favorable opportunity to accomplish this great and indispensible task of organization. Labor is in large demand in nearly all the industries. The workers are in a militant mood and, if organized, will organize readily. A well-organized campaign would sweep millions of them into the unions. But the present situation is not only a golden opportunity; it is also a warning. If Labor neglects this splendid opportunity of the war time without developing a full plan of organization or even attempting to realize that one was necessary, so naturally nothing may be expected from them now. They have their alleged organizers are too busy playing politics and fighting “red.” They are worrying more about disciplining the Seattle Central Labor Council for its progressive stand than they are about organizing the oppressed slaves of the Steel Trust.

The Official Disorganizers

In the various industries the situation is not much better. The organization of the bridg- e, steel workers organized even if a 100% organized out of some 500,000 in the industry. At its present rate it will be a year or two to preserve their union and the advan- tages they have won through years of bitter struggle, he completely neglects the urgent task of organizing the hundreds of thousands of unorganized miners in the Alabama, Colorado, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and other districts. In the steel industry the situation is even worse. There is the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers, with only 8,000 members out of some 300,000 in the industry. At its head stands “Grandma” Mike Tighe. So in- capable and timid that he could not keep the steel workers organized even if a 100% organization were presented to him on a silver platter,
all he can do in the present situation is to cringe, to the eternal disgrace of Organized Labor.

There must be an end put to this situation. The labor movement must be roused to a realization of its duty and opportunity in the present period of "prosperity." This means that the militants must become active everywhere. They must build fires under the reactionary leaders and insist that a great campaign of organization be started. If left to their own devices these leaders will do nothing to organize the craft unions into industrial organizations and to put an end to the stagnation existing. The leaders would be killed if they were hopelessly lost in the enervating swamp of Gompersism. There is not a breath of life or progress in them. The leaders are doing nothing to organize the craft unions into industrial organizations, and on the other, to sweep the masses into the re-organized unions.

There Must Be a New Deal

To build up the unions more necessary is simply to whip up the unorganized masses to driving the unorganized to the doors of the craft unions. This means that the militants must become active everywhere. They must build fires under the reactionary leaders and insist that a great campaign of organization be started. If left to their own devices these leaders will do nothing to organize the craft unions into industrial organizations and to put an end to the stagnation existing. The leaders would be killed if they were hopelessly lost in the enervating swamp of Gompersism. There is not a breath of life or progress in them. The leaders are doing nothing to organize the craft unions into industrial organizations, and on the other, to sweep the masses into the re-organized unions.

"Amalgamation and an Organization Campaign"

Considering the reactionary type of our trade union leadership, it seems a far-fetched and impossible proposal to change the craft unions into industrial organizations and to put an end to the stagnation existing. Yet every intelligent worker knows that this is what must be done if the problem of organizing the unorganized is to be solved. In fact, it is exactly what is being followed in England. In that country the leaders are conservative enough, God knows, but they have at least enough gumption to make some pretense of effectively combating the situation. The General Council of the Trade Union Congress (which is roughly equivalent to the Executive Council of the A. F. of L.) is conducting a double campaign of amalgamation and organization. It is at once holding amalgamation conferences between the unions in all the important industries and it is carrying on a nation-wide "Back to the Unions" drive in all the big industrial centers. Much progress is being achieved in both directions. It is exactly this kind of movement that is needed in America, only prosecuted more vigorously. What we need and must have is, on the one hand, amalgamation, and on the other, a great organization drive in all the industries. Then will our reactionary leaders realize this patent fact? To wake them up and to stimulate organized Labor into undertaking this indispensable double campaign of amalgamation and organization is now the greatest task confronting the militants. The organization of the unorganized is the supreme problem of our times. Upon its solution depends the welfare, the strength, and the actual life of the whole labor movement.

Unemployment and the Coal Miners

By Freeman Thompson

DURING the war period this country saw the number of coal mines doubled, with an enormous increase in the number of miners. Today there are approximately 11,200 mines, capable of producing 850,000,000 tons of coal annually. The normal demand for coal ranges from 300,000,000 to 500,000,000 tons per year, according to industrial conditions. The result of this top-sided condition of the industry is unemployment or partial unemployment for hundreds of thousands of miners. In many mining districts the industries of America increasing their demand for coal enough to put our miners back to work on the regular 8-hour, 300 days per year, or 2,400 working hours, which is now necessary to get a decent livelihood? Will the growing demands of transportation and machinery get us back to work again?

No. For each year the demand for new sources of power is being met, not with coal, but with oil, gasoline, and hydro-electric plants. These relative advances of American machinery are slowly eating the heart out of the coal industry. And the latter is burdened with exorbitant freight rates, profit-grabbing coal barons, and profiteers, hyped-up "machines." Turn your eyes to Niagara Falls, with only a portion of that great power harnessed, and see the marvels accomplished when the little labor skinners, but we are deeply concerned about what will happen to the fifty per cent of the coal miners who will lose their jobs when the fifty per cent of the mining companies go into bankruptcy. So that is no solution to our problem.

If the eminent Searles, Farrington, Peabody, et al., are dancemasters of the problem, that does not mean there is no way out. The members of the United Mine Workers must and will tackle it, and solve it. You, the coal miner, do you know further that you produce nearly four times as much as any other coal miners in the world in the same working time, so that 16 hours per week should be the basis of the work day and should pay a living wage? And is it not as plain as day that the only way we can escape unemployment, starvation, competition for jobs, and eventual destruction of our organization, is to force this equal division of work and keep the earnings of the miners up to at least the present level?

There are obstacles to overcome before we can accomplish this task. We must complete the organization of the miners, and we must hook up closer with the rest of the labor movement, particularly with the railroad workers. Today when we confront a struggle for the coal barons we find they have 120,000,000 tons of coal piled up on the surface; and in addition 290,000 miners still unorganized, capable of producing 275,000,-