Aspects of the French Labor Movement

By Wm. Z. Foster

Since the formation of the Communist International five years ago many new developments have taken place in revolutionizing the labor organizations. Various forms, previously unknown in most countries, have been developed and popularized. Among these are shop councils, shop nuclei, and trade unions. In Russia, the vanguard of the revolution, these vital proletarian institutions are highly developed. In the other countries of an industrial character they are on the order of business and are coming into existence with greater or lesser speed. At the present time the French labor movement, industrial and political, is re-organizing itself according to these new needs. What progress is being made and how it is taking place should be of interest to American militants.

Shop Councils

Shop councils are organizations of the workers directly on the job. They are delegate bodies of all the workers employed in given enterprises. Being root in the shops, they are much closer to the masses and their problems than local trade unions can ever be. They are the basic mass industrial revolutionary organizations. When militant and well organized under capitalism they exert a strong control over the "hiring and firing" of workers; they see to it that all union regulations are scrupulously respected by the employers; they closely follow the course of their industry and undertake to learn the intimate details of how the business is conducted.

In case of strikes the shop councils, as they represent all the workers, unorganized as well as organized, bring much larger masses to the struggle than the trade unions can bring. Eventually the shop councils are destined to become the real local units of the trade unions. They are the direct representatives of the masses, unorganized and organized, who are the true leaders of the movement, the basis of all the Communist Parties.

From its inception the Communist International has realized the great importance of the shop councils and it has ceaselessly stimulated the drive to build them up in various countries to build up shop councils. Great progress has been made in Germany, but it is with the French movement that we are primarily concerned.

The shop councils movement in France is about two years old. It has taken on importance only since the formation of the C. G. T. U. (Unity General Confederation of Labor.) This revolutionary organization is giving them whole-hearted support. It is interesting that the reformist C. G. T. (General Confederation of Labor) is opposed to the shop councils on principle, claiming that they are by nature rivals of the trade unions. In Germany the reformist leaders have about the same attitude, although they dare not express it so frankly. They content themselves with quietly cutting the heart out of the shop council movement—one of the few primary conquests of the 1918 revolution—while at the same time pretending to be friendly to them.

The shop councils movement in France, although intended for all industries, is at present making greatest headway among the miners, textile workers, furniture workers, and metal workers. In each case it is the workers themselves that are taking the initiative, and at the same time their revolutionary spirit is so strong that they are not yet even aware of the fact as they are very weak they are unable to set the movement up properly from the start. They do not as yet actually found the shop councils, except in a few instances. This stage the movement is in, but present the calling of meetings of delegates from the various shops, factories or mines in a given industry and district. These delegates are elected by the workers, organized and unorganized, at such mass meetings of them as may be called in connection with the various plants. Later, the actual shop councils are formed.

Many meetings of delegates so elected have taken place recently in France. These meetings take on the aspect of conventions. On March 9th, 600 delegates, metal workers, representing 200 plants, principally in the Seine district, met at Paris. On the same day the miners met in 185 mines in the Con- vention in Denain. They represented nearly all the mines in the district. Some were affiliated to the C. G. T. U., some to the C. G. T., and many were unorganized.

Conferences of a like character have been taking place in many other districts. The full C. G. T. U. is stirred by the shop council movement.

Briefly, the immediate aims of the movement have been to stimulate the development of the shop councils in all industries. 2) To build up the trade unions. 3) To develop the demands of the masses and to secure the support of the workers in their struggle against the employers. The movement takes on greater volume with the passing months, particularly in view of the pressure now being put upon the French working class by the rapacious employers. This movement is doing much to enhance the already great prestige of the C. G. T. U.

Shop Nuclei

Shop nuclei are political organizations based on the industry. They were eventually as the bases of the Communist Party, even as the shop councils must be the foundation of the trade unions. The shop nuclei consist of the members of all the Communist parties in a given enterprise or industry. They bring the political struggle of the Party right into the shops. They are a revolutionary department of the old territorial form of organization developed by the socialist parties everywhere. They root the Party right in the heart of the industries where the class struggle rages ceaselessly. Thus they enable the Party to really function as the vanguard of the proletariat, by so situating it that it can dominate the shop councils and be in the thick of their daily struggles.

The shop nuclei hold the political and industrial movements together and make of them one rounded organization. Just as the trade union movement needs the shop councils to actually put it into contact with the great laboring masses and their problems, so the Communist Party needs the shop nuclei for the same purpose. Without shop councils and shop nuclei both the industrial and political movements of the workers must remain disjointed and largely isolated from effective action with the masses.

Even as in the case of the shop councils, the Communist International, from its inception, has recognized the supreme need of shop nuclei. In 1921, at the Moscow Congress, while the Russian Party was stressing this point heavily. Nor has the C. I. ceased pronouncing upon the matter since.

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TRADE UNION COMMITTEES

One of the big issues in the French trade union movement (the C. G. T. U.) for the past two years, was the question of the organization of trade union committees by the Communist Party. In 1921, at the Marseilles Congress, the Party decided to form such committees, or nuclei. But nothing definite was done about it. Frossard was secretary and, having the Jauresist conception that a party should stand aside, attend to its own political work and leave the trade unions alone to perform
their industrial functions, he sabotaged the whole project so long as he was in office. The Party committee, therefore decided to have itself appointed, accomplished practically nothing. In 1922, at its Paris Congress, the Party took the matter up again and laid more elaborate plans for the formation of trade union committees, together with corresponding committees in all the national and local unions. The function was to organsize and propagate communism in the unions.

This action at once made the matter a burning issue in the C. G. T. U. The opposition, consisting of "pure" syndicalists, anarcho-syndicalists, and Trotskyists, made a wild protest. They declared that if the Communist Party were allowed to have such committees it would be the end of the trade union movement as such, for it would lose its independence and degenerate into merely an appendage of the Soviet Communist Party. They emphasized this issue as an argument against affiliating to the Red International of Labor Unions.

The matter came to a head in the Bourges, 1922, Congress of the C. G. T. U. By a strong majority, the Congress declared not only in favor of the R. I. L. U., but also to permit organizing the trade unions. Had its result provided that the members of these nuclei would submit unquestionably to the decisions and discipline of the unions. The whole issue threatened to split the C. G. T. U.

But, after creating all this commotion, the trade union committees have not amounted to much. There is a national committee of 13 members (appointed by the Party) but they are not very active. There are also a few committees in the larger centers but they are not very active or well organized. Pierre Monatte, a veteran militant in the French labor movement, was one of the three national secretaries of the trade union committee.

The Triple Movement

All three of these movements—shop councils, shop nuclei, and trade union committees—are necessary to the labor movement. The shop councils are the basic organization industrially of the masses; the shop nuclei are the organized revolutionary vanguard of the unions, and the trade union committees are the organized revolutionary nuclei within the trade unions. They do not conflict with each other but complement and complete the general revolutionary structure.

But France, like other countries, is finding out that it is a real task to learn the functions of these new forms and to adopt a balanced program with regard to them. At present there is a tendency towards a sort of faddism in the matter of organizing a broad policy which includes all three of the movements, each in its proper place, leaves a tendency to favor one or another of the movements at the expense of the rest. In such a competition the trade union committees are not faring very well. They represent an old, tried, and homely movement and do not attract as much attention and service as the newer and more glittering shop councils and shop nucleus movements.

The working out of a real balanced program, with all these new forms given their proper function and place, is, therefore, one of the most urgent needs now confronting the French labor movement. What is wanted is a plan embracing at once the shop councils, shop nuclei, and trade union committees.

Greetings to the Italian Daily!

The left wing unionists, indeed all revolutionary workers of America, will hail as another accomplishment of the Workers Party which will give tremendous assistance to the labor movement, the New Communist daily paper in the Italian language started this month in Chicago, for general circulation throughout America. This new daily in Italian will greatly aid the militants, especially in the needle trades, the textile and in the mining industries. Subscriptions outside Chicago are $5 per year with special bundle rates for distribution at a cent and for a copy in the United States, T. U. E. L. members and workers in contact with Italian workers should make use of this new medium of education.


Agamalaman Clothing Workers Resist Reaction

By Earl R. Brower

IN spite of all its defects, and they were many and serious, the Sixth Biennial Convention of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, held in Philadelphia, May 12th to 17th, stands out as the most encouraging event in the labor movement in recent days. A militant left-wing was present, defined its program, and fought and scored a victory.

The left-wing had demonstrated, by a great membership meeting, that the control by the right-wing was not in evidence. The delegation, whose election had been accomplished by violence and illegal removal of names from the ballot.

Report on Local 2, from the credentials committee, was delayed until after the case of Local 5 had been decided. In the latter, it was evidently an artificial protest, brought to offset the recent events in the I. L. G. W. XL, and which had also been struck at the A. C. W. of A. convention, a majority of the votes being for Local 2 delegates.

When the committee recommended seating the delegates of the right-wing, the whole matter of their elections as delegates was aired in the convention. The right-wing did not attempt to refute the charges made. A general denial for the record was considered enough, and the real plan made was to "preserve the reputation of the union." The administration threw its vote to the right-wing, although President Hillman disavowed both sides and made no issue of the questions. The vote was 171 combined right-wing and administration, and 89 left-wing votes. This left-wing strength stood solid throughout the convention, and at one time swelled into a majority. It was the first registration of the left in the A. C. W. of A. as a whole.

In this battle the delegates of the New York workers' union were the center and militant factor of the right-wing. By their tactics they soon had the whole convention noting them. Rumors were rife of threats on their part to stage disruptive demonstrations, as their means of bringing pressure to bear upon the administration votes. They got the votes and seated the Local 2 delegates, but the whole incident did more to destroy the right-wing prestige than all the left-wing propaganda could have done. It was the only time that the right showed its own face.

The Issue of Week Work

A resolution calling for the establishment of week-work in all markets, as against piece-work or standards of production, was another crucial point in the convention. The New York market has week-work, established through many battles, while other systems rule.