The Ladies Garment Workers Awaken

By Wm. Z. Foster

The time was, a number of years ago, when the needle trades unions were in the vanguard of the trade union movement of the United States. They really stood for progress, and at all conventions of the American Federation of Labor they were to be found in the bloc of organizations lined up against the reactionary Gompers' machines. They were an ever-victorious machine, and Gompers and he was never more happy than when attacking them viciously.

But such a situation is now merely a matter of history. The leadership of the needle trades unions, which one at least partially reflected the revolutionary spirit of the rank and file, has now become practically indistinguishable from the leadership of other trade unions. Officially the needle unions stand for few or no policies in advance of those of the bulk of organized labor. They have repudiated every semblance of the revolutionary spirit that has ever marked the trade union movement of the United States. They really stand for the protection of the workers' economic interests, the farcical trial staged by the Sigman administration in a desperate effort to discredit the leaders of the left wing, and the brutal expulsions—all these things have received the widest publicity.

Sigman's War Against the Left Wing.

But it is in the International Ladies' Garment Workers that the revolt is taking on its most pronounced form. Following in the footsteps of the present President of the International Ladies' Garment Workers, who has been drag- oned through the whole organization by betraying the workers in every movement they have been for better conditions since he took office. He further prepared the ground for revolt by the bitter persecution which he levied against the left wing in every union that the reactionaries seek to cover up and particularly those of the International Ladies' Garment Workers. The spontaneous outpouring of thousands of members in New York have demonstrated their opposition to the growing corruption and reaction among the needle trades leadership by overthrowing Kaufman's machine in the Joint Board of New York and electing the militant left-wing, Gold, as the head of this Board which forms the backbone of the whole organization. In the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, also developing as the Hillman machine moves toward the right.

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It is characteristic of the right-wing program of betrayal in every union that the reactionaries seek to cover up and justify their ruinous policies by concentrating an attack upon the left wing and by trying to convince the workers that the danger they have to confront is from the left and not from the right. In the present situation, the Sigman bureaucrats are following this policy with classic orthodoxy. They viewed with alarm the growing strength of the left wing. They awaited only a favorable opportunity to deliver a heavy blow at this left wing. When Sigman and Perlstein, attempted to gain an advantage over Brodick by capturing the three big local unions, Nos. 2, 9, and 22, by arbitrarily removing their executive boards, they touched the match to the great heap of tinder they had piled up. They soon began a campaign of threats and pressure to consummate their purpose. It was pushing the rank and file beyond the last limit of endurance, and they revolted en masse.

Rank and File Aroused.

The story of this revolt, one of the most spectacular and significant in the history of the American labor movement, need not be repeated. The spontaneous outpouring of thousands of rank and file members to the great mass meetings to protest against the insufferable policies of Sigman & Co., the raids of the administration gangsters to capture the union headquarters, the defiance of these headquarters by the rank and file, the enormous meeting at the 'Yankees' Stadium, where 30,000 cloak and dressmakers demanded the resignation of Sigman, Perlstein and Feinberg.

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This is how the New York Times which is pleased to give Sigman and his agents ample space in which to spread their poison against the best members of the organization, Sigman's tool, Feinberg, charged the TT suspended officials with having violated the Constitution of the organization of the following "crimes":

"On May 1st, 1925, the Executive Board of Local 22, and the Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the local, called and organized a public meeting under the guise of a May Day demonstration, which, upon the invitation of the organizers, several hundred members of the local was addressed by avowed enemies and opponents of the International Ladies' Garment Work- ers' Union; the speakers who were invited to address the meeting were members of organizations opposed to all the settled principles of trade unionism, and particularly those of the International Ladies' Gar- ment Workers' Union, and the American Federation of Labor with which it is affiliated. I, e. the Workers Party, the Communist Party, and the Socialist Party. The speakers were invited to address the meeting under the guise of a May Day demonstration, which the organizers of the local was addressed by avowed enemies and opponents of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union; the speakers who were invited to address the meeting were members of organizations opposed to all the settled principles of trade unionism, and particularly those of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, and the American Federation of Labor with which it is affiliated. I, e. the Workers Party, the Communist Party, and the Socialist Party.

From "The Big Stick," Jewish satirical weekly.

60 per cent of the International in New York, but also its very best proletarian elements.

In their eagerness to strike at the Communist militants, trade union bureaucrats have in many other unions raised the charge that the Workers' Party and the Trade Union Educational League have been, in the first case in opposition to trade unionism generally, and in the second place a dual union, and upon the basis of such charges they have either expelled members outright from the union or have deprived them of their rights to sit as delegates in Central Labor Councils. But, in no case was there such frantic protest noted upon as in the case of these suspended executive boards. Once again, even as he did in the case of beginning the expulsion policy in general, Sigman takes the lead in endeavoring to externalize the attack made upon the revolutionary elements in his organization.

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If not the willing consent of the officialdom, were constitute the "crime" of financing the meeting. The fact that Communists import the importance of the economic demands of the workers and to increase solidarity of the workers. It must resist the splitting tendency to fight against the latter's corrupt agents, the Sigman bureau. This course would inevitably concentrate the fight one sidedly upon the elimination of those leaders who have effectively resisted the efforts from the corrupt leadership and to demand a new union. But this movement runs certain dangers. One is the fear that its leaders should make the mistake or minimizing the natural resentment of the rank and file at the persecutions from the left wing. This danger is further accentuated by the demonstration of this fact is the loyal manner in which the masses of the bureaucrats to force a definite split, and likewise they have rallied to their support. The consequence is that the organizations are unable to maintain a grip upon the industry and to win even the most modest concessions for the workers. The industry is slipping to them from under their influence and is rapidly becoming an "open shop" industry. The conquers won by the needle workers through long years of struggle are being lost one after another.

But the great revolt now taking place in the needle trades foretells a fundamental change in the situation. The workers are demanding what is recognized as a fighting policy of class struggle. They will put at their head men who understand that the workers can gain their demands, not by a policy of surrender to the employers, but by one of militant struggle against these employers. They will insist that the present work and domesticated craft unions in the needle trades be combined into one powerful industrial union organized on a shop committee basis. They will insist that the unions embark upon an active campaign to build a mass of militants. They demand that the leaders who has committed the additional stampeded into a "red" hunt. They understand that the natural resentment of the rank and file at the persecutions of these militants. Ample demonstration of this fact is the loyal manner in which the masses have rallied to their support. The movement now agitating the needle workers in the Ladies' Garment Industry is bound to produce profound changes in the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. But this movement runs certain dangers. One is the fear that its leaders should make the mistake or minimizing the importance of the economic demands of the workers and to concentrate the fight one sidedly upon the elimination of "Brindellism" from the union. It is the connecting link between the mass of the local workers and their industrial union, between the workers and the organs of the state. It is one of the channels through which all the measures and all the ideas of the republic pour into the rank and file workers.

First of all, however, it is the organ that represents all the workers of the factory between the general meeting and the executive.

The general meetings of all the workers take place twice a month. At those meetings where the workers personally state their opinions and formulate their demands, decisions are taken on many of the most vital problems of factory life. Every six months the general meetings are held and a Factory Committee. At present Ivan Ivanovich Shishkin is the chairman of the committee. It is this man of culture that Russia is now governed. Workers of the Shishkin type form the backbone of the new order. It, therefore, will not be a place to gain closer acquaintance with a revolutionary worker.

He is thirty-seven years old, but the air of boyish innocence over his face. He has a weathered face, vivid dark eyes and a nervous mouth. He wears no beard or mustache but his face is always covered with a slight sheen of perspiration. His manner is simple, he barely rakes his voice, and it is impossible to imagine him in a state of rage. Alltogether he is a mild, friendly, good-natured Russian whose perfect case does not betray the harsh and strange deeds he has suffered through. He had a taste for reading. Any revolutionary party calls the personal in his case. He was fired and driven out of factory premises "in 24 seconds." Shishkin now has greater ambitions. He is strong, active, and the factory, to gain entrance into a factory he had to use his brother's passport. From the age of twenty-one till the age of twenty-eight he worked in a textile factory. The revolution of 1905 swept over the country like a destructive flame. Shishkin, rich with the experience of a town worker, attempts to organize the village struggle against the landlord. A successful strike for higher wages is carried out under his leadership. For this feat he is put into prison for a term of eight months.

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