

Crisis in the Needle Trades and the Way Out

Stop the Sectarian Split Course -- Rebuild the Forces of the Left Wing

By Ben Gitlow

The intolerable conditions in the needle trades industry and the role of the reactionary bureaucracy in the A. F. of L. unions and in the Amalgamated Clothing Workers as the servile tools of the bosses' schemes against the living standards of the workers are creating wide discontent among the needle trade workers throughout the country. These conditions are responsible for bitter resentment and great unrest among the hundreds of thousands of organized and unorganized needle trade workers. There is every opportunity of making this discontent conscious, and directing it in struggles against the bosses and the reactionary officialdom. There is every opportunity to mobilize the workers to fight for better conditions and for union control of the shops. There is every opportunity to build the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union by organizing the unorganized and by reestablishing the left wing in the reactionary unions.

The N. T. W. I. U., however, is not availing itself of these opportunities. Quite the contrary is the case! The policies now being pursued are such as to divorce the union from the masses, to destroy its prestige, and to divide instead of to unite the workers. The Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union, instead of growing, instead of gaining strength, is going backwards. It is losing strikes. It is losing influence. It is losing membership.

The Situation and the Problem

The issues here are so fundamental that they involve the very life of the union. For this it is necessary to examine the issues courageously and thoroughly. What is the situation? In the reactionary unions there are organized today 175,000 workers. This is a considerable section of the needle trades workers and under no circumstances can be ignored by the N. T. W. I. U. What is the membership of the N. T. W. I. U.? It has about 7,000 members. The bulk of the industry is unorganized. Out of the 500,000 workers employed approximately only 200,000 are organized.

It is clear the big problem in the building of the N. T. W. I. U. is first, the organization of the unorganized needle trade workers and second, the building of a left wing in the reactionary unions in order to win the masses of needle trade workers for our program and to drive the Schlesingers, Hillmans, Dubinskys, Kaufmans, etc. out of the ranks of the needle workers.

The comparison between the membership figures of the N. T. W. I. U. with the reactionary union does not, however, adequately give the relative strength of the two forces. The N. T. W. I. U., with a correct policy, could overcome the handicap of numbers because even today its strength in the industry, in opposition to the bosses and the reactionary union officials, is much greater than its membership indicates.

The figures, however, are startling. What has happened to the needle trade workers who were ideologically and organizationally with us? The cloakmakers, the furriers, the dressmakers and millinery workers, where have they gone? It is clear from the figures that they have been forced back to the right wing. Less than 7,000 remain in the N. T. W. I. U. In New York alone we had 30,000 cloakmakers, 8,000 furriers, 20,000 dressmakers, 3,000 millinery workers. A powerful left wing existed in the Amalgamated. In Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Rochester, Los Angeles, thousands of workers followed us. These workers have not melted away and disappeared like sugar in water. They have remained in the industry. Why were so many of them forced to leave our organization and go back to the right wing?

They were once a part of the needle trades left wing which was the spearhead of militancy and radicalism in the trade union movement of the country. Why were these workers who followed us in the break with the reactionary policies in favor of a left wing program, forced to leave us and go back to the unions under the control of the reactionary right wing leadership? An answer must be given to this question. They have not become reactionaries, renegades, and "social fascists" over night. Mainly responsible for this debacle of the left wing are the wrong policies pursued today!

The present leadership of the union and the Communist Party put the responsibility for this upon the so-called past errors and mistakes made by Gitlow, Zimmerman and Gross. But these comrades were expelled from the Communist Party and driven out of the leadership in the needle trades over one year ago. A new line of policy was adopted and a new leadership installed. It took only one year of these new trade union policies to wreck the left wing and to reduce the N. T. W. I. U. to an organiza-

tion of just a few thousands, having no control of conditions in the shops.

The Source of the Crisis

The crisis of the needle trades left wing is the result of the wrong policies of the present leadership of the Communist Party, of the TUUL and of the N. T. W. I. U. The Communist Party leadership having decisive influence in our union, we have suffered the costly defeats we did because they have forced upon our union a narrow sectarian policy. Our union and activity has been narrowed down to those Party members who agreed and fully supported the policies of the present Party leadership. The membership as a whole has not been drawn into trade union action. The union has been converted into a propaganda sect. Democracy in the N. T. W. I. U. has been flaunted. The struggle against the bureaucrats in the right wing unions has been given up. From a mass organization of workers our union has been turned into a caricature—neither a union nor a political party. The struggle within the Party has been transferred to the union. Instead of organization work the present officials of our union, ably assisted by Johnstone have engaged in slandering and discrediting the left wing before the workers. No campaigns for organizing the industry have taken place. No efforts have been made to maintain union conditions and standards in the shops. No program of trade union unity to unite all the workers behind a class struggle program has been put forward. No campaign has been conducted for the immediate economic needs of the workers. Only a campaign against "Lovestonism" has been conducted and against Gitlow, Zimmerman and Gross and those who agreed with their views in order to make possible the expulsion of many comrades from the union.

The failure to keep contact with the masses, the failure to appreciate the needs of the masses, the failure to develop and broaden the mass character of our union, the failure to build up a left wing in the reactionary unions, the failure to conceive of our union as a fighting organization of all workers, with a class struggle program of militant action, against the bosses in the interests of the workers, is mainly responsible for the defeats we have suffered and for the great loss in membership and influence. It is precisely because of these disastrous policies that the right wing is making the headway it is. They are gaining not because of their strength but because of the weakness of the left wing. The right wing with the full assistance of the bosses and the capitalist government has been alert to capitalize on our weaknesses, failures and disastrous mistakes.

The right wing has succeeded temporarily in forcing into their ranks all the "middle elements" together with the masses under their influence on the basis primarily of the errors, shortcomings and sectarianism of the N. T. W. I. U. today. We must recognize, however, that the position of the right wing is not solid and lasting but rests upon a foundation of sand because it is based on cooperation with the employers which means serving the interests of the employers to the detriment of the workers.

It is necessary to fight the disastrous sectarian, wrecking line of the present leadership of the N. T. W. I. U. and of the TUUL in order to prevent the complete liquidation of our union as a genuine union. Just look where these policies are leading the union. Only 6,000 to 7,000 members left in the N. T. W. I. U. No left wing in the Amalgamated, in the I. L. G. W. U., in the Hat, Cap and Millinery Workers Union. Many of the builders and founders of our union eliminated from activities. The lying attacks of Green Wolf, and the Jewish Daily Forward, are revived and made the official statement of our union and the TUUL.

The policies we once pursued in the needle trades were the policies advocated by the Communist Party and the TUUL in the trade unions before the change of line in the Communist International and in the Party. As a result of these correct policies the left wing was on the road of becoming a powerful influential factor in the trade union movement of the country. In the needle trades unions, gangsterism was driven out, a militant fight put up for trade union democracy, the expulsion campaign of the right wing bureaucrats defeated. Kaufman was driven out of the furriers, Sigman out of the I. L. G. W. U. The 40-hour 5-day week was raised into a national issue. The needle trades became the initiative center of the left wing in the labor movement. This is a record of achievements to be proud of. It is a vindication of correct trade union policies pursued in the past and for which we are fighting today.

Some Real Mistakes

While fundamentally the policies pursued were correct and brought results, nevertheless in the course of our activities and struggles a number of serious mistakes were made by the left wing and the N. T. W. I. U. The recognition of these mistakes is necessary if we are not to repeat them. The most important of these mistakes were the following:

1. The mistake committed at the Philadelphia convention (1925) immediately following the Joint Action fight in not taking over the union and kicking out the bureaucrats, in going back to the Sigman convention after the delegates representing the overwhelming majority of the membership had walked out.

2. The failure to settle the cloakmakers' strike of 1926 the eighth week, as a result of which we lost an opportunity to consolidate our organization and to get better terms from the bosses.

3. The confused bankrupt policies of the new line towards the recent so called general strike of the dressmakers led by Schlesinger.

4. The absolute failure to propose a policy or take any steps to win over the workers in the I. L. G. W. U. for the N. T. W. I. U.—to build a left wing in the I. L. G. W. U. and other reactionary unions.

For these most serious mistakes the advocates of the new policy are primarily responsible. For example, at the Philadelphia convention (1925) it was Johnstone and Dunne, and not Gitlow, who ordered the workers who had bolted the ILGWU convention to "crawl back on their bellies."

Consider the following examples of the new course in the trade unions:

1. Contempt for trade union organization, allowing non-unionists to elect delegates to a national convention of the union. Here is a quotation from the letter of June Croll, organizer in Philadelphia:

"On Tuesday, June 3rd, 6 P. M. there will be a meeting of all union members in your shop for the purpose of electing a delegate to the convention of our union taking place in New York on June 6, 7, 8."

"You are entitled to one delegate at this mass convention where there will be at least five hundred delegates from shops all over the country. Come to the meeting and bring as many sympathetic workers with you as you can regardless of whether or not they are members of the union. The convention is open to all needle trade workers who are ready to organize and fight in order to better themselves and must be utilized as a means of winning new members through having them participate in the convention elections."

2. Abandonment of the 200,000 organized needle trade workers to the right wing bureaucracy and running away from the fight against the Hillmans, Schlesingers, etc. for the leadership of the organized needle trades workers. The following is from a leaflet issued calling all needle trades workers to a mass meeting in Bryant Hall on June 5th:

"The needle trades workers must also beware of the Lovestonites who advocate the organization of left-wing oppositions within the company-unions. The company-unions cannot be reformed, but must be fought against and destroyed, and all those elements who want to draw the workers into the so-called struggle to reform, improve or make use of the company unions in the workers struggles, are enemies of the workers and must be fought. At the present time clubs and centers are being formed in the company-unions with the aim of diverting the attention of the needle trades workers from the campaign for 6,000 new members, conducted by the Industrial Union, and from the mass rank and file convention."

The resolution for convention discussion adopted by the Shop Delegates Council on May 15 goes even further:

"That the members of the shop committee, or individuals in the open shops (all company unions) are open shops)

shall become active members in the building and block organization committee and carry on energetically the drive for 6,000 new members."

All "company union shops" are open shops! "Company union shops" means all shops organized in Amalgamated Clothing Workers, I. L. G. W. U., Hat, Cap and Millinery Workers Union! This is an open declaration for splitting tactics, for abandoning the 200,000 organized workers in the reactionary unions to the right wing officials and for individual shop scabbery!

3. Abandonment of the organization of the workers on the basis of their pressing economic needs which is the first prerequisite in the organization and building up of unions. We again refer to the May 15 document of the Shop Delegates Council. Nor one paragraph included to deal with the economic problems of the workers.

4. Abandonment of organization campaigns in favor of an abstract campaign for membership "in general." This means giving up the fight to win the shops and place them under union control. This is not militancy but cowardice.

5. Conversion and narrowing the union into a factional agency of the Party. The following are quotations from the May 15 document of the Shop Delegates Council: "The results of these main errors were that a program of class collaboration was built up resulting in the formation of a right wing opportunist group under the leadership of Gitlow, Zimmerman and Gross, who now fight to make this right wing line the policy of the N. T. W. I. U. and openly carry on a struggle against the T. U. U. L. and the R. I. L. U. . . . Only with the defeat of the conscious opportunist leaders, Gitlow, Zimmerman and Gross, who led the struggle for the opportunist program at the Fourth Congress of the R. I. L. U. . . . to condemn the Gitlow, Gross, Zimmerman opportunist clique. . . . This is factionalism in its worst form—bringing into the union the slanderous, abusive, lying invective of the Party's "enlightenment" campaign!"

6. Abandonment of the united front. This is a quotation from leaflet which sees all developing oppositions as conspiracies staged by bureaucrats to create false illusions among the workers:

"The registered workers of the needle industry, especially the cloakmakers, dressmakers, furriers and men's clothing workers, must be on their guard today. They must not permit themselves to be fooled by the fake campaigns and false struggles carried on in the company-unions. These so-called group conflicts in the company-unions are especially staged by these agents in order to create false illusions amongst the workers that they can reform the company-unions and raise them to weapons of struggle."

This is pure unadulterated 100% sectarianism, De Leonism! Only we, in the industrial union, are the chosen ones to fight against the bosses and the right wing officials. The 200,000 organized workers are all fools and dummies. The great leaders fail to see that the intolerable conditions are creating wide discontent in the reactionary unions which forms the basis of some of the oppositions that arise. This contempt for the masses, this opposition to united front action, make it impossible for N. T. W. I. U. to capitalize the growing discontent in the reactionary unions for organizing the left wing and building the N. T. W. I. U.

7. Abandonment of the task of politicalization. The struggle among the trade union masses and the workers generally for politicalization or the American working class as a class, thru the advocacy of the organization of a Labor Party.

These are the features of the present policies of the N. T. W. I. U. These policies lead away from the building up of our union, lead away from building up the left wing, lead away from organizing the unorganized, lead away from a struggle against the reactionary trade union officials, lead away from militancy and struggle.

The Basis for Our Policy

What should be the basis for our policy?

WHO HELPS THE ENEMIES OF LABOR?

ש-8-טסרסססס

1930 20 '98 '99

קאמוניסטישע פארטיי ווייזט אויף אזאלעס וואס דער פארזעכטס האט געשריבען וועגען די פיהרער פון אחרע ווינאגס אוי געזען אמת

The Jewish Daily Forward—the organ of the reactionary forces in the Jewish labor movement—is jubilant. Referring to the official Party attacks upon Gitlow, Zimmerman, Gross, etc. it writes: Communist Party Proves That Everything the Forward Wrote About the Leaders of Its 'Unions' Was True.

Two Miners

(Continued from page 1)

THE N.M.U. CONVENTION

The Hazelton Conference of the National Miners Union was a most shameful and union smashing conference. Thru deliberate confusion as to the time of the day, they arranged that the conference should begin before we came. When we came Tashinsky was already reporting. The first clash came when I asked for an extension of time to 15 minutes—which the conference gave me. In his speech Tashinsky attacked us, saying that the individuals following Lovestone are working to smash our union. Everything was picked from the top. The chairman of the conference was Carl Herman, the vice-chairman was not even a union member, the secretary was Dan Slinger. On the credentials committee was Klavinkas, a Party member but not in the union. In the discussion all of our leading comrades (all workers in the mines) took part; on the side of the sectarians there were only the organizers: Tashinsky, Frankfeld (not a member of the union), Slinger, Zaldokas, McLaughran (I.L.D. organizer). Only one rank and filer, a man from Dumore, spoke.

The second session was a report by Klavinkas for the credentials committee that 58 delegates were present, including two women. One of them was the delegate from our Unemployment Conference. At this time they took advantage of the fact that I was out of the room to try to change the order of business. The original order of business was: the question of the program, report of Frankfeld on the R.I.L.U., the reading of the resolutions (there was no resolutions committee), the election of the Executive Board, and the report of the I.L.D. organizer, McLaughran. The change of order of business was made to put the program and discussion for last. This was done because of fear of discussion. After the report of Frankfeld on the R.I.L.U. he made the motion: That the conference nominate candidates to the R.I.L.U. and that we conduct a campaign in the local unions. I criticized the fact that there had been no campaign in the local unions before the conference so that the conference could have selected delegates from among the nominees of the locals. I made the amendment that this conference go on record in favor of the sending of delegates to the R.I.L.U. Congress and that the incoming Executive be instructed to notify the local unions of this fact and to carry thru a mass campaign in the local unions for the nomination of delegates. The vote was 29 for Frankfeld's motion and 18 for my motion.

We put forward our resolution of the Unemployment Council and for the united front June 15 demonstration. Frankfeld and the others made the motion to refer these proposals to the Executive while we insisted that these resolutions be accepted. The vote was 27 to 18. Our resolution on the Labor Party was of course rejected. Our resolution on Bonita and Mendola was adopted. Our resolution on the recognition of the Soviet

We maintain that a trade union is not a revolutionary political party. A union is an economic organization of the working class. In order to be able to defend the interests of the workers, a union must be organized on the broadest basis and must draw into its leadership all militant elements. It must inspire the workers with self-confidence, responsibility and a militant will to struggle. It must mobilize the workers for the fight against the bosses, their reactionary agents, and their government defenders.

What must be done? The most bitter fight must be conducted against the wrecking sectarian policies of the present leadership of our union. We must fight for those policies which will regain the masses of needle trades workers for the left wing and for the N. T. W. I. U. We are for a united front of all forces in the needle trades who will support a class struggle program of militant action against the bosses and the reactionary bureaucrats, so that we may establish a mighty, genuine, militant industrial union of all needle trades workers, a union of militancy, a union that will engage in militant strikes to better conditions, to organize the unorganized and to fight capitalism. We propose a program of trade union unity in opposition to a program of sectarian splitting and union wrecking.