

What About the Needle Trades?

by Ben Gitlow

WHAT is today going on in the needle trades—what are the prospects for the workers—what is ahead for the left wing and for the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union are questions of vital importance to every left winger and to every Communist. Why? Because the left wing and the Communists had succeeded in establishing their largest base in the needle trades. Because here the workers by the tens of thousands followed the leadership of the left wing and the Communists.

The needle trades workers under left wing and Communist leadership drove the right wing and the reactionary A.F.L. bureaucracy out of the fur and ladies garment industries in New York. In addition they had considerable if not a majority of the workers in the New York Amalgamated supporting them. In Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia and Cleveland the left wing was very strong.

The ladies' garment workers and the furriers in Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston were decisively in the hands of the left wing. The millinery branch of the Hat, Cap and Millinery Workers Union was under left wing leadership. In the Hat, Cap and Millinery Workers Union as a whole the left wing had considerable strength. It was fighting for the complete control of the union and for the ousting of the right wing reactionary officials.

The rank and file revolt in the needle trades was deeply rooted in the economic conditions prevailing in the industry. It was an expression of the revolt on the one hand against the speed up, wage cutting, disemployment and insecurity prevailing in the industry and on the other hand against the policies, conduct, and methods of the reactionary right wing officials. The workers followed Communist leadership because in the main the Communists not only took up the fight for the workers but worked out a program and policies which were based upon their actual needs.

The Joint Action Committee fight, the victorious furriers' general strike, the winning of the 40-hour, 5-day week thru direct militant struggle against the bosses won for the Communists the support of the majority of the workers in the needle trades and greatly enhanced the prestige of the Communists thruout the entire labor movement.

The success of the left wing and the Communists called forth a bitter opposition headed by the reactionary officialdom of the A. F. of L. A united front was formed of the Executive Council of the A. F. of L. and G.E.B. of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the *Forward*, the Socialist Party, right wing trade union officialdom, the manufacturers and the capitalist government. The express purpose of this united reactionary front was to smash the left wing and the Communists. The A. F. of L. took direct control over the needle trades unions. It established scab unions in the fur and cloak industry. The right wing Socialist Party leadership acted as a scab agency. Every means at hand was used to crush the needle trades workers who were following the left wing. The left wing stood its ground. When the N.T.W.I.U. was organized it had a large membership. It was a genuine mass organization. It had good organization also outside of New York in such cities as Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston.

These successes in the needle trades were due to the correct policies applied to favorable conditions. These policies were in a large measure responsible for establishing the Party as a factor in the labor movement as a whole. Then the C.P.

was under the leadership of the comrades who are today in the C.P.-Majority Group. Today these comrades are expelled members of the Communist Party. Wrong policies are being applied today which aggravate the unfavorable objective situation. What are the results? Let us examine the situation. Let us face the facts as they are. Exaggerations or blinding oneself to the truth will not help us. The truth will be painful. An examination of the facts will prove this. It is necessary to bare the truth regardless of how much it hurts. The left wing has everything to gain and nothing to lose by knowing and telling the truth.

An examination of the situation in the industry proves that the needle trades offer a fertile field for the N.T.W.I.U. The bulk of the industry is unorganized. The introduction of the speed-up, new machines, standards of production, reorganization, have brought about disemployment of thousands of workers, wage cuts, a break down of all union standards, the sweat shop and sweat shop conditions. Class collaboration on the part of the reactionary right wing officials of the needle trades have brought about the worst and most intolerable conditions in the industry. The right wing officialdom acts directly and brazenly as agents of the bosses, reorganizing shops, throwing out workers, installing standards of production, agreeing to wage cuts, etc. Great dissatisfaction prevails among the workers. The right wing officialdom from Hillman and Schlesinger to Zaritsky cannot satisfy the demands of the workers. These right wing officials are working overtime satisfying the demands of the bosses. It is only the left wing that can organize these workers to fight for better conditions. Regardless of the position of the N.T.W.I.U. today, it can and must become the only and dominant trade union in the industry. The problem for the left wing is to accomplish this in the face of all the difficulties that must be overcome and all the obstacles that are put in its way. The N.T.W.I.U. today is the only genuine union in the industry. It is the only union that can mobilize the workers to fight for themselves. It must be built up.

An examination of the actual conditions prevailing in the trade, the intense suffering of the workers, the large chronic unemployment that exists, the dissatisfaction of the workers, the brazen betrayals of the workers interests by the right wing officialdom, the gangsterism and corruption in the right wing machines, the open shops, the low wages long hours and the defiance of all union standards by the bosses, are a good basis for developing left wing sentiment among the workers. Nevertheless we must record the fact that the left wing is losing ground and not gaining. Even a considerable number of left wing workers, willing or unwilling, are going to the right. The left wing has also suffered a number of defeats, in the last furriers strike, in the cloak makers, and loss of membership and influence generally. In the Amalgamated, the left wing has been reduced from a mass organization to the Party fraction. We are losing ground in the milliners; the right wing is stronger today than the left wing in that union. The left wing is only a fraction of what it used to be.

For the first time in five years the right wing is raising its head. Schlessinger, who recently would have been howled off a platform by the needle trades workers, said at the Cleveland Convention as president of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union:

"I make reference to that nightmare only to say that the Communists were reduced to zero and that our organization

For Fighting Proletarian Unity!

Statement of the Millinery Group of the C.P. Majority Group

IN the *Freiheit* of Feb. 10 and the *Daily Worker* of Feb. 11, there appears the following statement of Comrade Schechter for the purpose of freeing herself of all "suspicion" of being opposed to the destructive policies and tactics followed by the present Party "leadership" in the mass organizations:

"In regard to the Lovestoneites, I am doing my utmost, together with other leading comrades, to expose and eliminate them from every leading position of our union . . .

"The unscrupulous and destructive methods employed by the Lovestoneites in the mass organizations must be fought most vigorously—and this I pledge to do."

This declaration represents the first time that the Party—thru the mouth of a Party functionary in a union—officially sponsors the tactics of extermination in trade unions and mass organizations. This declaration is further proof of the unprincipledness forced upon the Party membership and of the attempt of the present leadership to introduce into the left-wing unions the methods used in the old A.F.L. unions. One of the main fights that the left-wing has always carried on and is still carrying on in the old unions and which is the expression of the struggle of the workers against the bureaucracy, is for democracy and against the elimination of the most active, militant forces, without which any union cannot be a fighting force for the interests of the workers.

All policies and tactics championed and followed by Communists must serve to unify and strengthen and build the organizations of the working class. This is the A.B.C. of Communist tactical principles.

The above statement of Comrade Schechter, exacted by the Party leadership, does not propose to strengthen the N.T.W.I.U. and Local No. 43 as part of it; instead it divides the ranks by introducing what actually amounts to a campaign of terror against the most active and militant forces who are building the Industrial Union.

Unemployment, reorganization, wage reductions, the offensive

has resumed its forward march."

They called the Cleveland Convention the "victory convention" and gloated over the victory over the Communists and the left wing.

The whole capitalist press hailed this so-called victory over Communism. Green greeted the convention as follows:

"The Communist menace which for a time held your organization in its grip has been conquered and your unions are free to perform their constructive and protective purposes."

How did the present Party leadership meet the issue of the Cleveland convention, the "victory convention" of the right wing over Communism? By ignoring it completely, by preparing to eliminate the best fighters from the N.T.W.I.U. because they did not agree with the sectarian disruptive policies they advocated! Not one demonstration was staged against the Cleveland convention to show to the whole world that the Communists and the left wing were not dead and far from defeated.

The International Ladies Garment Workers Union has not become suddenly a trade union fighting for the interests of the workers. It remains one of the most reactionary A. F. of L. unions with company union leadership and company union policies. The right wing Socialist Party leadership of this organization works closely in cooperation with Tammany

against week work, the forcing of the collective agreement on the workers, etc. are the means by which the right-wing aims to fasten their class collaboration policy upon the millinery workers. They are thus planning to renew their attack against Local No. 43 and against all left-wing forces in the right-wing locals of the Cap and Millinery International.

The cap and millinery workers are beginning to realize that the pogrom against Local 43 is a pogrom against all millinery workers. The dissatisfaction of the workers is reflected in the dissensions in the ranks of the right-wing bureaucrats.

Instead of uniting the left wing forces and proposing a program of action to intensify the struggle against the right-wing and the bosses, and to organize the workers in the trade, the Party leaders have "excluded" our comrades in Local 24 from the T.U.U.L. Opportunities to intensify the struggle in Local 24 have been sabotaged, as in the case of the Fairway Shop. The issues of dissension in the right wing and the struggle between the Locals 50 and 42 have been allowed to pass unnoticed. And on top of this, a pledge is made by Comrade Schechter to eliminate the best elements of the left-wing in Local 24, Local 43, and in the whole N.T.W.I.U.

The workers in the shops have shown that they will not heed the advice of Comrade Schechter. The workers have already shown this by electing our comrades as delegates to the Shop Delegates Council.

Every worker can readily see the destructive tactics of the Party leadership—as expressed in the declaration of Comrade Schechter. The facts speak for themselves! Every honest rank and filer should repudiate such statements as Comrade Schechter's and the destructive course which they represent. Every militant worker should rally in support of the C.P.-Majority Group in its struggle against the elimination of the best elements of the union and for fighting proletarian unity in face of the bosses and the right wing bureaucrats, for the building up of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union.

Millinery Group of the C.P.-Majority Group.

Hall politicians and with the decisive capitalist interests in the garment industry in order to further rationalize the industry thru more speed-up, more reorganization, more standards of production, more disemployment, etc. This is the capitalist program for stabilizing production and ending chaos in the trade.

Schlessinger speaks the language of the bosses. The union echoes the phrases of the manufacturers. This is brought out clearly in a letter sent out to "dress factors" by Schlessinger on October 17, 1929 asking for a conference. The central point of this letter is the industry and not the workers says the letter:

"If the industry is to be saved from chronic and destructive chaos, and if the workers are to be assured livable earnings and working conditions approximating even the most modest standards of American life all factors in the industry must join hands in an intelligent effort to reorganize it on the basis of reason and decency."

The leopard has not changed its spots. The question is the saving of the industry and its reorganization on the basis of reason and decency. "Reason" is—due regard for the interests of the bosses and "decency"—no militancy from the workers.

(Concluded in the next issue)