

Paterson - A Test of Policy

by Ben Gitlow

This is the first of a series of articles by Ben Gitlow on the Paterson Strike.

The strike of the silk workers in Paterson, which started in the end of July 1931 and which lasted three months, involved over 7,000 workers. The strike was much more significant than the number of the workers involved would indicate.

The strike was of very great importance to the working class because it afforded the working class an opportunity of estimating the results of the application of different trade union policies. Especially at this time, when the labor movement is so demoralized, when splits and dissension rend the militant and revolutionary forces in the trade unions, when extreme reactionary policies and leadership dominate the unions, is it necessary to weigh soberly and objectively trade union policies and tactics. Precisely at a time when pessimism engulfs the workers, when progressive and militant leadership is lacking, is there manifest among revolutionary and left wing workers an eager readiness to abandon old trade union policies and tactics as ineffective and useless and to adopt new ones which promise rapid effectiveness. Impatience and failure to attend to the hard, difficult and often very disagreeable tasks in approaching and winning the trade union masses, is generally back of the will-o'-wisp policy of abandoning the trade unions and losing oneself in so-called "revolutionary phrases".

FORCES IN THE PATERSON STRIKE

The line-up in Paterson very clearly demonstrated this. The following clashing forces operated in the Paterson strike:

1. There were two conflicting union forces: (a) The National Textile Workers Union, claiming to be a revolutionary, industrial union of textile workers. This union was under Communist Party leadership. (b) The American Federation of Labor unions, which, in Paterson, represented an amalgamation of the silk workers locals of the United Textile Workers and the Independent union—the Associated Silk Workers of America. The leadership of the amalgamated A. F. of L. unions was in the main conservative and reactionary.

2. Two Communist forces clashed in Paterson. The official Communist Party leadership carried out its trade union policies thru the National Textile Workers Union. The Communist Party (Majority Group), insisting upon a policy of unity and working within the existing unions regardless of how conservative and reactionary they may happen to be, was part of the strike leadership of the amalgamated A. F. of L. unions.

3. The Communist-led National Textile Workers Union claimed to represent a "united front from below", not of organizations but of individual workers. The so-called "United Front General Strike Committee" was made up of workers hand-picked by the leadership of the Communist Party.

The strike of the A. F. of L. amalgamated unions represented a united front of organizations and was representative of all elements in the labor movement. It included the locals of the United Textile Workers and the Associated Silk Workers, the Communist Party (Majority Group) and the Conference for Progressive Labor Action. In the general strike committee and in the strike leadership were included left wing workers, Communists, progressives, Socialists, Socialist Labor party members, anarchists, syndicalists, and former members of the I. W. W. In other words, it represented a genuine united front action from the most reactionary leadership of the A. F. of L. to the revolutionary working class leadership of the Communist Party (Majority Group). The test of trade union policies is most sharply and clearly brought out in the clash of policies of the two Communist forces in Paterson, the official Communist Party and the Communist Party (Majority Group).

TWO POLICIES

The official Communist Party leadership policies in Paterson were the following:

1. There can be no unity between the National Textile Workers Union and the A. F. of L. unions. The A. F. of L. is a company union, a bosses union; it must be smashed and destroyed.

2. All elements in the labor movement who do not fully endorse the Communist position in the trade unions must be fought as enemies of the Working class, strike-breakers and agents of the bosses.

3. Opposition to united front action against the bosses.

4. Making the immediate political and factional objectives of the Communist Party leadership, the first and foremost consideration of the strike led by the National Textile Workers Union.

5. Resorting to bluff, outrageous slander, boasting and gross exaggeration in a desperate effort to bolster up its dual union, splitting, dividing policy.

The policy of the Communist Party (Majority Group) expressed itself in Paterson as follows:

1. The organized workers in the trade unions represent a force that can be stimulated and mobilized for action against the bosses. The trade union bureau-

cy and the membership of the trade unions are not identical. The existing A. F. of L. and reactionary unions are not anti-working class organizations even tho their reactionary leadership utilize them in the service of capitalism. Adverse economic conditions are bound to affect the trade union membership. The Communists, militants and progressives, if they are to give leadership to the trade union masses and galvanize them in action must work inside the trade unions in a constructive and not destructive manner. The trade unions of the A. F. of L. and others of similar type are not company unions but quite the contrary, a reservoir of potential working class strength and action against the capitalists, provided militant leadership is given to the trade union masses. Such leadership can only be given by the militants, radicals, progressives and Communists going into the trade unions and not by running out of them.

The Communist Party (Majority Group) worked in the Paterson strike in the amalgamated A. F. of L. unions. In the Paterson strike the Communist Party (Majority Group) succeeded in having three members on the general strike committee of the A. F. of L. amalgamated unions who were in a position to give militant leadership to the masses. They were Eli Keller, former national secretary of the National Textile Workers Union, who was expelled by that union, Charles Zimmermann, and the writer of this article.

2. The united front of organizations and forces on a program of struggle against the bosses is necessary for the greatest mobilization and most effective action against the bosses. In Paterson, the Communist Party (Majority Group) first raised the question of the united front in conferences with representatives of the Conference for Progressive Labor Action (Muste Group) and of the locals of the United Textile Workers and the Associated Silk Workers.

3. Unity in the ranks of the workers is essential in the struggle against the bosses. In Paterson the Communist Party (Majority Group) worked for unity. All the unity proposals brought forward by the Communist Party (Majority Group) and accepted by the A. F. of L. amalgamated unions were rejected by the official Communist Party leadership and resisted by it.

In Paterson, therefore, it is clear that the clash of policies was a test of the Leninist policy of working with the masses and developing militant working class action and leadership, as exemplified by the Communist Party (Majority Group) against the policy of sectarianism and dual unionism, division and the substitution of revolutionary-sounding bombast and phrases for action and results.

ADMISSIONS OF FAILURE

Paterson served as the chemical laboratory of the class struggle in which the tests were made. The results are that the official Communist Party leadership must admit its failure in Paterson. It admits its failure in the recent resolution of the Trade Union Unity League as follows: "In the Paterson strike at a certain stage we lost this initiative because of the slowness and hesitation in carrying thru the correct line adopted in the struggle against the Muste-Gitlow maneuvers."

Harrison George, in the *Daily Worker*, admits the failure a little more crudely, answering a query

"What has happened to the Paterson Strike?"

He writes: "Firstly, we don't know either what has become of the Paterson strike. Maybe there never was a strike and we just imagined it. Maybe there was and maybe it's still on. We don't know and it seems doubtful whether the organizer of it knows either. Maybe, in fact there just ain't any National Textile Workers Union at all. Maybe it's what the philosophers call a social myth. And maybe finally the Trade Union Unity League might do something about it."

Failure, defeat, pessimism for a policy that leads to nowhere but demoralization and isolation!

RECOGNITION OF SUCCESS

How about the policy of the Communist Party (Majority Group)?

The *Monthly Labor Review* of the Department of Labor reports:

SILK WORKERS, New Jersey.—The strikes of July 22 and July 27 involving some 8,000 textile workers still continue, but give promise of an early amicable settlement. On September 15 it was estimated that approximately 4,000 workers had returned to their plants with satisfactory readjustment of the wage schedules on the basis of a compromise, with recognition of the union and a 44-hour week. These settlements, it is understood, apply to the workers affiliated with the Associated Silk Workers and the United Textile Workers.

The policy of working inside the trade unions, of the united front, of unity, was not a will-o'-the-wisp, a myth. It brought results and organization. That is what counts.

The second article in this series, entitled "The Initiative in Paterson" will appear next week.