

The Initiative in Paterson

by Ben Gitlow

This is the second of the series of articles by Ben Gitlow on "Paterson and the Communists."

The Paterson silk workers strike was a revolt against the oppressive and intolerable conditions which prevailed in the mills. Paterson was at one time the best paid, the best organized silk center in the United States. Silk workers in other centers looked to Paterson and longed to establish the conditions prevailing there in their own localities. In addition, Paterson is a city of traditions for the silk workers. It is linked up with memories of great militant struggles against the bosses. These struggles were not confined to the Paterson workers and the silk industry alone. They assumed such a militant fighting character that they aroused national attention and the interest of the entire working class. In these memorable struggles the workers were led by the various organizations which fought for the leadership of the trade unions. The workers have had their full share of dual unionism, of A. F. of L. trade unionism, of independent unionism; they have been subjected to the political persuasion of the various political forces and groups within the labor movement.

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THE SILK INDUSTRY IN PATERSON

I stated before that the silk workers of Paterson revolted against oppressive and intolerable conditions. This is putting the case very mildly. The industry had undergone some changes in recent years. It had grown considerably, with the result that while Paterson still remained as the ideological, political and organizational center of the silk workers, yet as far as the industry itself was concerned, the weaving end of it, it was only one center, other centers arising as large and as important—notably, Allentown. Also, the character of the industry in Paterson had undergone some marked changes. A large number of the large shops had moved out of town. The small medium-sized shop, employing from 25 to 80 workers, became typical of Paterson. The outstanding change in Paterson was the development of the so-called family-shop, a vicious contracting system, the sweat-shop of the silk industry. The family shop consists of a very small number of looms operated by the owner, who obtains the old looms on credit and exploits them by employing his wife, sons or daughters, and perhaps some close relatives, occasionally luring one or more weavers also. The warps are supplied to them either by silk jobbers or manufacturers. They contract to produce for a smaller price per yard than is paid to the weavers in the factories. There are no limits to hours. The conditions are frightful. The family-shop, however, developed in Paterson to such an extent that it involved hundreds of these sweat-shops, and thus actually determined the standards for the industry. As a result of this and also of the economic crisis which had hit the silk industry, it had degenerated from the best paying silk center to the worst, from a center where the best working conditions prevailed to one where the most frightful conditions were the lot of the workers. Wages were so slashed that workers averaged \$15-\$20 a week in place of \$35 and more earned previously. Hours ranged from 12, 15 and 16 a day. The speed-up was terrific. The bosses imposed all kinds of fines and robbed the weavers deliberately in yardage. If a slight damage occurred the worker was fined. After weaving a bolt, the weaver was paid for from 5 to 10 yards less. Prior to the strike the bosses were serving notice of further wage-cuts, more hours and more impositions upon the workers. In spite of day and night shifts, unemployment was rife, the workers being out of work for months, actually starving. Paterson afforded a good picture of capitalist bliss.

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THE STATE OF THE UNIONS

How did the unions fare under these conditions? The following unions operated in Paterson: the A. F. of L., thru three craft locals of the United Textile Workers, the loomfixers and twisters, the warpers, the ribbon twisters; the weavers thru an independent union, the Associated Silk Workers of America, organized on an industrial basis; and the National Textile Workers Union, affiliated to the Trade Union Unity League, dominated and led by the Communist Party leadership. The National Textile Workers Union was no factor in the situation, its membership previous to the strike being about 40 or 50 members. The other unions were being driven to the wall by the worsening conditions. They were losing members because of their failure and inability to cope with the situation. It became clear that unless something was done soon, unionism would be completely wiped off the map as far as the silk workers of Paterson were concerned.

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THE ROLE OF THE C.P.-MAJORITY GROUP

To the Communist Party (Majority Group) falls the credit of consciously initiating a move to fight against

the slave conditions, to prevent the smashing of the unions and to organize the industry. It was apparent to the Communist Party (Majority Group) that the workers were seething with discontent and were ready to revolt and fight against the bosses for a better deal, for better conditions. The Communist Party (Majority Group), from the very start, recognized that before an effective strike action could be engaged in, certain basic and important factors would have to be taken into consideration. They were the following:

1. The workers were divided into different unions, the A. F. of L. unions being inactive, the Associated having little vitality in organizing the workers and in resisting the attacks of the bosses and the National Textile Workers Union assuming an air of monumental conceit, having as its main objective the heaping of abuse, calumny and invective upon the other trade unions.

2. The ranks of the workers were not only divided and split up in different unions, the bulk of the workers were not only unorganized, but there was a keen division among the conscious workers along the lines of the various political organizations and groups in the labor movement—such as pure and simple unionism of the A. F. of L., independent unionism, I. W. W., Socialists, Communists of the official Party and the C.P. (Majority Group), Socialist Laborites, anarchists, etc.

3. There was no united progressive left wing force among the workers, its ranks and organization having been split and dissipated by the dissensions, splits and divisions in the labor movement and particularly in the Communist movement.

4. There was no single force that could inspire confidence in the workers and thus be able to mobilize them and lead them into action.

The Communist Party (Majority Group) realized that only an actual demonstration of unity could win the confidence of the workers, could inspire and lead them into action. The workers were discontented. They wanted to fight. But they did not see any force that could furnish them leadership for a victorious, united struggle. The Communist Party (Majority Group) was fully aware of this fact and set out to establish such a demonstration of unity on behalf of the workers struggle that would bring a response of the workers.

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THE JOINT COMMITTEE

The C.P. (Majority Group) therefore proposed that an organization committee must be set up in Paterson of representatives of all the trade unions and of the various elements in the ranks of the workers behind a common program for organizing the industry, preparing for a general strike and launching the general strike.

Our proposals were first raised in the National Textile Workers Union. The Communist leadership rejected it. They attacked the makers of the proposal, Eli Keller and Ellen Dawson, as "renegades", "traitors", "scabs," etc. They would have nothing to do with a united front on a genuine basis. They called "conferences" of their own for a general strike. The workers failed to respond. Eli Keller and Ellen Dawson were not only expelled but ostracized from the very union they had helped to organize and to lead in many memorable strikes like Passaic, New Bedford, Gastonia, etc.

To the sectarian policy of the National Textile Workers Union and the Communist Party the mass of workers did not respond. They had too many costly experiences with sectarianism and splits.

The C. P. (Majority Group) also proposed this plan of unity to the Conference for Progressive Labor Action and, thru it to the A. F. of L. unions and the Associated Silk Workers of America.

At first the unions were hesitant of conferring with Communists. But the longer these unions delayed, the harder they were being driven to the wall. We continued to repeat our proposals and to insist upon the need of immediate united action. Finally, a conference was agreed upon. Representatives of the A. F. of L. unions, of the Associated, of the C.P.L.A. (Musteites), and of the C. P. (Majority Group) met. Of the C. P. (Majority Group) there were present at the preliminary conferences: B. Herman, Eli Keller and Ben Gitlow. The proposals of the C. P. (Majority Group) for a united front campaign to organize the industry for a general strike and for amalgamation into one union of the A. F. of L. were agreed to.

The C. P. (Majority Group) had taken the initiative in drawing the forces together. It succeeded in organizing the united front. It established the necessary unity that inspired confidence and supplied leadership for another memorable militant and victorious struggle on the part of the Paterson silk workers.

The third article in the series "Paterson and the Communists" will appear in the next issue.