

The United Front in Paterson

by Ben Gitlow

Unity is a much abused word.

In the name of working class unity all kinds of destructive splitting tactics are used in the labor movement. The strike of the Paterson silk workers served as an object lesson on unity. The Communist Party (Majority Group) carried out in Paterson the policy of the united front. It succeeded in uniting trade union organizations and various groups in the labor movement behind a common struggle against the bosses for better conditions and for trade union organization. The united front movement in Paterson, initiated by the Communist Party (Majority Group), was successful because it helped to mobilize the workers for the strike, to develop militant strike activity, to win better conditions and to strengthen the union of the silk workers thru amalgamation, increased membership and an increased spirit of unionism. It also made possible the birth of a progressive and left wing group in the unions.

The united front in Paterson as I stated in my previous articles included trade unions—the A. F. of L. unions and the Associated Silk Workers of America, an independent union. It included groups like the Conference for Progressive Labor Action (Muste group) and the C. P. (Majority Group), a Communist group, and enlisted the support of Socialists, I. W. W. syndicalists, anarchists, etc.

This united front was most bitterly attacked by the official leadership of the Communist Party and its trade union department—the Trade Union Unity League.

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On November 11, the resolution of the National Executive Committee of the Trade Union Unity League estimated the united front in these enlightening words:

"The A. F. of L. and its various wings from Muste to Gitlow have played an increasing role as strike-breakers, and against the demands of the unemployed. Every struggle of the masses can only be carried on correctly, if it is directed against the reformists as part of the combination of the bosses, the government and labor bureaucrats."

This statement is instructive. It explains what happened in Paterson. It exposes the basic trade union conceptions of the official leadership of the Communist Party and the Trade Union Unity League. It is a flat rejection of any united front action with the A. F. of L. organizations and groups within the A. F. of L. According to the T. U. U. L. resolution, the A. F. of L. and its various wings have played an increasing role as strike-breakers, every struggle of the masses can be carried on correctly if it is carried on against them as part of the combination of the bosses and the government and the labor bureaucrats.

This is a declaration of war which divides the working class and its organizations into two definite, opposing camps: (1) The A. F. of L. and all groups, tendencies, etc., in the A. F. of L. as an enemy force to be attacked, smashed and destroyed; (2) the revolutionary unions of the T. U. U. L. under Communist leadership, as the only working class organizations to be recognized, supported and built up.

This is a strange conception of unity. It is pure and simple conceit against which Lenin fought so bitterly. It is Simple-Simon trade union policy. It is bound to develop some queer conceptions and the most destructive, splitting, demoralizing tactics in the labor movement. If capitalist conditions are such, taking the T. U. U. L. resolution seriously, that no opposition in the A. F. of L. unions can develop against the capitalists, then capitalism is so entrenched, has such a definite hold on the masses, that no genuine opposition to capitalism in workers organizations, like the A. F. of L. unions, is possible. This is giving too much credit to the ability of the capitalists; it exposes the extreme pessimism and hopelessness of those presenting this position, of building up a trade union front against capitalism.

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The counterpart to the united front initiated in Paterson by the C. P. (Majority Group) was the so-called "rank and file united front from below." A caricature of unity! It is Christian Science applied to trade union tactics.

The National Textile Workers Union calls togeth-

er its own members and others to come to a mass meeting, presents a hand-picked "general strike committee" for the approval of the mass meeting and then declares the "united front" established by calling the committee the "United Front General Strike Committee!"

Then the fight for "unity", in line with the basic policy laid down, as noted above, in the resolution of the T. U. U. L. begins. The strike for conditions, for unionism, against the bosses, is altogether secondary.

From the first bulletin issued by the United Front General Strike Committee and the National Textile Workers Union, I quote:

"The workers have openly rejected the leadership of the A. F. of L.-Associated crowd. They have not been able yet to break from their company union leadership and come to us."

This was issued when 7,000 workers were following the united front strike leadership of the amalgamated A. F. of L. unions, when hundreds were being arrested on the picket lines, when in Clifton, the Henry Doherty mill was using injunctions and policemen's clubs against the heads of the strikers.

The same bulletin advocates "unity" further on in the following terse words:

"That is why the bosses tell striking workers if they want a union, they should go to the Associated. The bosses know the Associated—now part of the A. F. of L.—won't fight them. There must be something funny about a union the bosses want."

From another strike bulletin issued from the same sources, we read first in reference to a parade of over 3,000 strikers following:

"They have to cover up the defeat of their victory parade of 422, most of them bosses."

Then, further on, during the bitterest weeks of the strike, it states:

"Is more proof needed than the U.T.W. and Associated are lined up with the bosses. Is more proof needed that they fear the power of the National Textile Workers Union? Is there more proof that the place of every worker is in the ranks of the National Textile Workers Union."

Calling for an open split of the ranks during the greatest activity of the strike!

When an actual attempt was made by rank and file workers to end the splitting, dividing tactics of the so-called "United Front General Strike Committee" and the National Textile Workers Union, this same

"The agents of the U.T.W.-Associated tried bulletin attacked the move as follows:

to get some of our workers to meet with a so-called rank and file of the fake union. It was a move to get some sort of fake unity across. We sent none of our leaders. But their committee had nearly the whole of the Joint Board on it. We sent this unofficial committee, knowing very well what the outcome would be but we did it in order to convince every one of our workers that we do not reject a chance of getting unity!"

I could quote leaflets, resolutions, speeches, etc. all along the same line. It is no wonder that the Party leadership and the T.U.U.L. admit failure in Paterson. They blame the strike leaders, the subordinates, for failure to execute the policy correctly and energetically enough.

But if this leadership were honest in analysing the situation, then they would have to admit that their basic trade union line makes the establishment of a united front and unity impossible. They would have to further admit that it makes inevitable the pursuit of splitting, disruptive strike-breaking tactics, precisely as was done in Paterson. And lastly, they would have to admit that the united front is not a scheming manouever but an effective weapon for mobilizing and leading workers in struggles when it is based upon a trade union unity policy as advocated by the Communist Party (Majority Group).

To force such a recognition requires a new attitude on the part of the membership of the Communist Party. They must stop being submissive followers and become active revolutionary fighters who fight for their convictions inside the ranks of the Communist Party and the T. U. U. L.