

Workers (Communist) Party

What the Trade Unions Mean to the Workers

By MANUEL GOMEZ.

THERE are over 35,000,000 wage-earners in the United States. Only about 4,000,000 are organized in trade unions. Why, then, do the Communists lay so much stress on the trade unions, constituting, as they do, such a small proportion of the total number of American workers?

The answer is simple. It consists in the fact that the unions are the mass organizations of the class struggle. The revolutionary working class party cannot function as a general staff unless it has an army, and the army, like every other army, must be organized if it is not to succumb to demoralization. The problem is, of course, to make it our army. Without organization the workers cannot carry out extended struggles successfully. This means, of course, that we must continue to insist upon the organization of the unorganized, but it also means that such organizations as exist at the present time occupy a strategic position with regard to the American working class as a whole.

The unions are not only mass organizations. They are, generally speaking, permanent organizations. This is one of the most important characteristics that distinguishes them from incidental organizational forms, such as united front committees, strike committees, etc. Last summer 1,100 workers employed in the plant of the American Sheet & Tube company at McKeesport, Pa., went out on strike. The strike was spontaneous and the workers entirely unorganized, yet they scored a complete victory. A few months later these same workers were

demoralized. Nothing of their victory remained.

Organization Necessary to Maintain Results of Struggle.

Permanent organization is necessary to build up a disciplined and conscious body of fighters. This is especially true because it is only in such organization that the separate experiences of the workers in the mass struggle are preserved. Where there is no permanent organization the lessons learned in the struggle become dissipated, scattered, lost.

Because of their organization and discipline, and because in their ranks are embodied the mass traditions of the entire working class, the trade unions exercise a powerful influence over all workers, organized and unorganized alike. The prestige of the unions is enormous. For good or for bad, they are able to draw wide masses along with them—as was proved conclusively during the World War.

The capitalists appreciate the power of the unions and as a result have devoted no little time and money to corrupting the labor bureaucrats, and even large sections of the highly skilled upper strata of organized labor. But the tendency to create divisions in the union ranks cannot change the essentially revolutionary role of the trade unions as mass organizations of the working class. Moreover, in this period of the world decline of capitalism there comes a time when the capitalists can no longer afford to pay out large sums of "bribe money," because the super-profits of imperialism suddenly cease to flow in and there are no super-profits to divide. We

have not come to that in the United States yet, but the effects of it are already seen in England, where the trade unions are now consciously advancing along the path of the class struggle.

Unions Exercise Influence Over Unorganized.

The Communists do not forget for a moment the revolutionary role of the trade unions, any more than they forget the present dangers. For this reason they enter the unions, for this reason they become "good union men," for this reason they participate in the day-to-day struggles of the unions against the bosses—struggles which by their very nature make the unions training grounds for the bigger struggles to come, as well as recruiting grounds for new Communists. And for this reason they carry on a consistent fight against all "class collaboration" schemes and against the fakirs that sponsor them.

Obviously, then, the trade unions have an importance out of all proportion to their numerical strength. They are not the only mass organizations of workers (e.g., fraternal societies, etc.), but they are the only ones with their roots deep in the industrial process itself. We must fight our way to leadership in the trade unions, not only because without the support of the great mass of organized workers the proletarian revolution in America is impossible, but also because in the process of the revolution itself the unions have an important part to play—and particularly after the revolution, when the workers are obliged to grapple with the tremendous problems of organization of industry.