

The Fight Against Sectarianism in the National Miners Union

By TOM JOHNSON

LAST summer the National Miners Union led the biggest strike of American workers under revolutionary leadership in the history of the labor movement. This summer the miners are again in motion, striking against wage cuts in Illinois, Ohio and West Virginia. Without exception these strikes, involving altogether close to a hundred thousand workers, are under the leadership of the reformist union—the United Mine Workers of America.

In no other industry has the capitalist offensive against the wages and standards of both employed and unemployed gone so far. Wage cut follows wage cut with clock-like regularity in all fields. The already totally inadequate charity relief to the unemployed is steadily reduced. The standard of living of the miners is being systematically forced to levels lower than that of any other important section of the American working class. The miners are ready to fight back. They *are* fighting back, as mass strikes in almost every important coal field prove. Why then has the National Miners Union completely failed to organize and lead determined struggles of the coal miners against the capitalist offensive? The whole future development of our union depends upon a correct answer to this question.

The basic factor in the situation is the *isolation of the union from the masses of miners.*

If the National Miners Union members, however, were organized in *functioning* locals, intimately connected with the masses of working miners in those mines where we have members and with the unemployed and blacklisted miners; if they understood how to establish and maintain firm contact with the masses; if they reacted immediately to every attack on wages and conditions; if, in a word, they were able to seize hold of the most pressing problems and needs of the miners and to organize first local and then mass struggles around them, they would constitute a powerful revolutionizing factor in the mining industry. Unfortunately, such is not the case. Why?

First reason: the inner orientation of the union. Our local unions lead a life of their own entirely separate and apart from the life

of the masses. They are so engrossed in their own internal problems and the general campaigns and problems of the revolutionary movement that they have no time to deal with the problems facing the miners with whom they are in contact. Mine local meetings, instead of discussing the burning needs and demands of the miners in *that particular mine* and the actual organization and leadership of a local struggle around such demands, are taken up with interminable discussions on the Communist Party election campaign, the campaign against the Dies Bill, the state of the local International Labor Defense organizations, etc., etc. Local meetings become kind of social gatherings where old friends meet to chew over and rehash internal problems and squabbles of every phase of the revolutionary movement.

Many of these general campaigns brought into the local unions are unquestionably important and must receive the attention and support of the union. The trouble is they are wrongly introduced, they are not considered in relation to the problems of the masses of miners in the midst of which the local works. Each campaign is treated as something separate and apart from other campaigns and is not used to further the central task of the local union—the organization of the miners in its mine for struggle against the coal operators' offensive. Miners join our union primarily to defeat wage cuts and win better conditions. When they find out that the local organization relegates such matters to second place they leave the union.

A UNION OF THE WORKERS

As a result largely of this inner orientation our local organizations, with a few exceptions, see little need for discipline and regularity in the functioning of the locals. The general attitude is: "We are all close comrades here, there are no 'outsiders,' therefore why worry about such things as meetings that start on time with a regular order of business and are run with discipline according to parliamentary rules? Such things may be necessary for a business-like organization such as the United Mine Workers, but we don't need them in a revolutionary union."

The point here is that the miners do want a business-like organization. They are used to meetings that start on time, to locals in the old U. M. W. of A. with a full complement of officers, to some formality and discipline in the conduct of the meetings, the regular payment of dues, etc. Despite the opinion of some comrades, we will do well to take over some of these earlier militant traditions of the United Mine Workers of America. Incidentally it may be

remarked here that we are only setting up barriers between us and the masses when we use this jargon of "Agit-prop," "Org. Secretary," etc., in our union. If the miners are used to and want a president, vice-president and secretary-treasurer in their union, both nationally and in the locals, why the devil not have them rather than Org. Secretaries, etc.?

Flowing directly from this whole conception of a "union *for* the workers, not *of* the workers," is the attitude of the union toward those struggles which do develop. A case in point is the Coverdale situation. The union had close to 100 members out of the 800 working in the Number 8 mine in Coverdale when the company, with the aid of the United Mine Workers of America, tried (successfully as it turned out) to put over a wage cut. Our whole approach to this situation was that of an outside agency coming in to help the miners defeat the wage cut. Instead of preparing for the fight through a broad discussion among the miners themselves on the forms and methods of struggle, the demands, etc., we came to the miners *from above* with a cut and dried formula of the united front, which not only the masses of miners but our own leading comrades failed to understand. (I sometimes wish we could stop worshiping at the shrine of those magic words "united front," and without once mentioning them, get down to the job of explaining to the miners in an understandable way why we must all fight together for certain definite demands if we really want to win them.) No serious attempts were made to develop the initiative of *all the miners*, including those outside our own ranks, in calling the strike to defeat the cut. It is typical of our work that when it came to a question of raising ten dollars to pay for trucks to bring unemployed workers to reinforce the picket line on July 1, our comrades came to the National Office of the union for this money and not to the miners who were involved. In its crassest form this attitude is nothing but rotten humanitarianism and has no place in the revolutionary movement.

This conception of the union as a narrow organization expresses itself also in the demand that all members be 100 per cent revolutionaries, ready at all times to sacrifice and risk their jobs in union activity. This attitude is deep-seated in the union. Not long ago a whole local of the union was expelled and the charter taken away by the district organization because of "inactivity." Our comrades must be made to understand once and for all that while we are a revolutionary union, we can never be a mass union if we restrict our membership to tested revolutionaries. We want every member of the union to be active. We can never achieve this by bureaucratic orders and threats of expulsion. It can only be achieved by carefully

explaining to our members the need and purpose of the proposed activity, the "why" and the "how" of it, thereby gaining their willing cooperation. Further, while doing our level best to draw every member into some form of union activity we must face the fact that if we are to be a mass union (and particularly when the union has a closed shop) we will inevitably have many passive members in our ranks who will do no more than pay dues and attend occasional meetings.

CONCENTRATION ON LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

The solution of this problem is not an easy one. It involves a fundamental change in our whole methods of work. In the first place *the center of gravity of the work of the top leadership of the union must be shifted from the apparatus to the local organizations.* The national and district leadership of the union must visit the locals mine by mine and there on the spot concretely show the comrades how to deal with the problems which face the miners. Secondly, we must insist that every general and political campaign brought into the local unions comes through the union apparatus in order that the union leadership may introduce these questions in a manner which will tie them up directly with the work of the union inside the mine or among the unemployed. Thirdly, we must carefully regulate the internal life of the locals in order that matters not related directly to the work of the union are not brought wholesale into the local meetings. Fourthly, through more frequent sub-district and district conferences the top leadership must keep in closest touch with the problems and needs of the locals and give them as far as possible personal assistance in the solution of their problems. Finally, we must declare unceasing war on every manifestation of the narrow sectarianism which abounds in the union.

Second reason: bureaucratic methods of work. Both a principal cause and effect of this situation is our bureaucratic method of work. The forerunner of our union, the Save-the-Union movement, had as one of its principal slogans the demand for "Democracy in the Union." This was a burning issue in the whole fight inside the United Mine Workers of America, led by the left wing, whose traditions our union has inherited. Yet it must be admitted that today there is almost no real trade union democracy in the National Miners Union. District, sub-district, and local secretaries are shifted from one place to another with complete disregard of the opinion and wishes of the membership.

An example: two people sitting in the National Office decide that for various reasons it will be a good thing to transfer the

present District Secretary of an important district to the same post in another and more important district. The decision is forthwith carried out. The local organizations in both districts learn of the change only when they receive a letter signed with an unfamiliar name over the title "District Secretary."

Another example: the union decided one month ago to launch a recruitment campaign for 10,000 new members. The decision was originally made by the same narrow group of two or three comrades in the national leadership. Then a letter was sent to members of the National Board stating the proposal and stating further that unless immediate objection was made the preparations for the campaign would start at once. The week following a meeting of the National Board was held which ratified the decision, and without more ado the letters went out to the locals informing them that the campaign was under way. Of course there is no real campaign and it should be obvious that no real campaign can be developed by the issuance of such instructions from the top alone.

The union leadership did not realize that it is necessary to initiate such a campaign from below, that a broad discussion must be organized in the locals on the need and the aims of the campaign. That through this discussion the arbitrary figure of 10,000 new members must be tied up with definite political objectives. That each local must decide on the campaign, set its own quota and relate this quota to the concrete situation in the mine in which it operates. Only when this has been done, only when every member feels that a recruitment campaign is a burning necessity, sees clearly that such a campaign will be a powerful weapon in the organization and leadership of strikes against wage cuts and mass struggles for unemployment relief, will the basis have been created for a successful campaign.

The same situation prevails in most of the local unions. No formal vote is taken on matters of prime importance. Regular and formal elections of new officials are not held. Important decisions are made by one or two leading comrades outside of local meetings, etc. Matters are even worse in the district and sub-district leaderships.

Bureaucracy finds particularly crass expression in the relations of the Party to the union. For example, let us take the election campaign of the Communist Party. No effort has been made to develop a discussion in the lower organs of the union on the political issues involved in the election. No real effort has been made to draw the locals into support of the campaign through a thorough understanding that the Communist Party alone fights for and defends the day-to-day interests of the coal miners. The usual practice is as follows: an org. letter goes out from the Party district to the

Party Section Committees instructing them, let us say, to have delegates elected to the State Nominating Convention. The Section Committee passes the word on to perhaps one or two Party members in each local union. The Party member comes to the next meeting of the union and out of a clear sky announces that the local must elect a delegate to the Nominating Convention. Because of the attitude that our union is a narrow organization made up of people "close to the Party" our Party member may not think it even necessary to discuss this question in the local meeting at all. He may simply state: "The Section Committee of the Party has informed me that we must elect a delegate to the Party Nominating Convention. I propose that we elect so-and-so." Such actions are by no means unheard of in our union.

How can we fight this bureaucracy which strangles democracy, stifles initiative and prevents the development of new cadres in our union? First of all the leadership nationally and in the districts and sub-districts must be broadened. The present scandalous situation, where we have on the National Board and on the various District Boards as far as I know them, *not one working miner*, must be decisively changed. Secondly, bureaus of the National, District and Sub-district Boards must be elected and must meet regularly, actually function and give leadership to the work. This will mean an end to individual decisions and will create the technical prerequisites for the development of collective work. Thirdly, the provisions of the union's constitution for the election of officers, etc., must be observed.

Finally, we must realize that the presence of well-functioning Communist fractions in all organs of the union from top to bottom will alone be some guarantee of correct Party-union relations and will be able to foster and develop trade union democracy. In the mine locals the question of establishing functioning fractions is the question of insuring proper work by the Party mine nuclei. In the leading committees of the union it is a question of actually setting up fractions which will meet regularly and will thereby be able to give Bolshevik guidance and direction to the work of the committees. Such fractions cannot be established over-night. It is necessary for the national fraction in the union to prepare at once a calendar plan within our capacity to carry out for the speedy formation of the fractions.

CONCRETENESS IN OUR WORK

Third reason: the top-heavy apparatus. A contributing cause of these bureaucratic methods of work, of this narrow leadership, of

this failure to develop initiative from below, is the top-heavy apparatus of paid functionaries. Our union, with an average of less than 500 members paying dues, supports in the principal districts of Central Pennsylvania, Western Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia, a total of eighteen full-time functionaries. Besides these recognized and "official" functionaries there are a host of unemployed and blacklisted miners devoting most of their time to the work of the union and in one way or another looking to the organization for support. Such a staff of functionaries by its very existence leads to bureaucracy and stifles the initiative of the rank and file. It leads to a situation where the rank and file membership refuse to undertake responsible work and demand that more and more of the work be done by paid officials.

Another result of this unhealthy condition is that none of our functionaries receive regular wages and many of them actually go hungry day after day. Obviously no one can do his best work under such conditions. Further, the upkeep of the functionaries swallows a large portion of the union income and seriously cripples other and more necessary expenditures. It is clear that the number of full-time functionaries must be drastically reduced and working and unemployed miners drawn into responsible work in corresponding degree.

Fourth reason: lack of concreteness in the work. Our isolation from the masses of miners can never be overcome by drawing up grandiose plans for mass work (most of which are invariably scrapped in the end) nor by general decisions "to make the turn to mass work." *Our isolation can only be overcome by concrete practical work in definite specified mines and among definite specified groups of unemployed miners.* We must make an end once and for all to general plans and decisions beyond our capacity to fulfill. We must apply now in practice the principle of *concentration*—and with the full realization that with our weak forces and organization concentration will mean also its opposite—the partial neglect for the time being of some important areas and fields of work. Hard-plugging, practical work along these lines will alone break down the barriers between the National Miners Union and the masses, will alone overcome once and for all the organizational isolation of our union.

In conclusion it is necessary to deal briefly with the two principal political tendencies which form the basis and the breeding ground in our union for bureaucracy and all forms of sectarianism. The first tendency can be summed up with the words: "Lack of faith in the masses and their readiness and ability to struggle." This opportunist political concept is widespread in the middle leader-

ship and in the lower ranks of the union. It found expression in Ohio where the National Board carried on a struggle against the determination of the Ohio comrades not to participate in the present strike which has not been finally concluded to this day. It found expression in Western Pennsylvania where, due to the clever maneuvering of the management and the U. M. W. of A., combined with our bad work, the Pittsburgh Terminal Corporation was able to put over a wage cut on July 1 without a strike.

To this same opportunistic lack of faith in the masses must be ascribed the failure of the National Convention of the union, held in March of this year, to raise a clear perspective of developing mass struggles in the coal industry and to sound a clarion call for the organization and leadership of these mass struggles by our union.

The failure of the union to develop and lead any important strikes in the present period, while scores of thousands are on strike under U. M. W. of A. leadership, has created the not entirely unjustified fear in the minds of some comrades that unless our union is able to organize and lead immediately mass strikes and struggles in the more important fields it is in danger of being wiped out. These comrades state: "We must have a strike now. The miners have shown they are ready to fight by the big strikes now going on. All we need to do is to call on the men to come out in almost any mine and they will strike. Then we can spread the strike throughout the whole district and really revive the union."

Theoretically this attitude is a concession to the "theory" of spontaneity. Its practical effect is to minimize and thereby cripple precisely that careful and skillful preparatory work without which a successful strike is impossible. The miners are following the United Mine Workers of America leadership in strikes today primarily because we have not shown them in practice by means of day to day organizational work inside the mines, that we are capable of organizing and leading a mass strike against the coal operators' attacks. This "theory" of strikes at all costs, with or without preparation, can only increase our isolation. It must be ruthlessly smashed.

Uncompromising struggle against the twin deviations of lack of faith in the masses and the "theory" of spontaneous strikes is the political prerequisite without which our fight to overcome the isolation of the National Miners Union from the masses cannot be successful.