

The Labour Lieutenants of American Imperialism

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POLITICALLY, the American Labour movement is to-day more backward than that of any of the big capitalist countries. Even the yellow Amsterdam and Second Internationals are too red, too militant for the American Federation of Labour.

In the main, the officialdom of the American trade union movement functions brazenly and aggressively as an agency of American imperialism at its worst. Our Labour leaders are, with too few exceptions, primarily serving as Labour lieutenants of American imperialism in the ranks of the organised and unorganised workers. On the whole, these trade union officials react swiftly and decisively to the needs and demands of the Yankee imperialists.

Setting the Pace for Reaction

Indeed, those Labour leaders of whom Engels spoke as lieutenants of capital in the ranks of the English workers, compared with many of the bureaucrats now infesting the American trade union movement, were indomitable militants. This is going some! Yes. Altogether too often is it true that our American Labour leaders pursue a policy far more reactionary than that pursued by some groups of powerful capitalists.

It is under such a leadership that our unions are tragically powerless. It is under such a leadership that at most three and a half out of more than twenty million industrial workers are organised. It is this leadership which is sabotaging all efforts to organise the unorganised, to build a Labour Party, and is expelling the Communists and other militant workers from the trade unions. It is this trade union officialdom, conspicuously exemplified by such notorious corruptionists as John L. Lewis, President of the United Mine Workers of America; Matthew Woll, President of the Photo Engravers' Union of North America and Major Berry, President of the International Printing Pressmen's and Assistants' Union of North America, that is calling a national conference to fight Communism in the American trade union movement.

What type of man is to be found in the official American trade union movement? How close are they to the rank and file of their unions? What is the attitude of these officers to the workers? To the employers? To the Government? What are their salaries? What are their interests in life? What are they after, as we say in America?

In the answer to these and similar questions we will find an accurate, though uninspiring, picture of an important phase of the American Labour movement. Here we will find a cancer on the very body-politic of the American working class.

Introducing our Labour Leaders

The great majority of the American trade union officials from the petty business agent up to the "Grand International President," feel contempt for the workers,

whom they consider below them. These Labour lieutenants of Wall Street feel themselves closer to the employers than to the workers; especially is this true when they hold high positions in the trade union movement.

These trade union officers are now American Labour's window on Wall Street. They model themselves on the bourgeois politicians, they ape the gang leader in their treatment of the workers in their organisations making complaints or seeking redress of grievances. These bureaucrats are developing a most destructive cynicism in their attitude towards their own work in the Labour movement.

They live comfortably, get very high wages and consequently develop a barrier, oftentimes insurmountable, between themselves and the rank and file of the workers. Even the average lower trade union officer has an income ranging from two to three hundred per cent. greater than the workers of the craft in which the union he leads is found. In the stronger unions the local business agents, handling mainly immediate shop grievances and regulating on the whole the every day relations between employer and worker, average a minimum of sixty to seventy dollars weekly. Here we are speaking of the business agent of the unions of skilled workers. Yet the average skilled worker, counting the loss of wages through irregularity of employment, does not throughout the year make more than about thirty-five dollars weekly.

The salaries of the presidents—international presidents as they are called—of the American trade unions range from three to twenty-five thousand dollars plus all kinds of emoluments annually. In the well organised crafts, the salaries of the international presidents of the unions run from seventy-five hundred to ten thousand dollars per year.

The High Cost of American Labour Leadership

The high-priced bureaucrats give two main arguments for their exorbitant wage demands upon the unions they run and ruin. These are:

(1) The trade union officer sells his labour power just as well and as much as any other worker does. Labour power is a commodity. The trade union leaders are highly skilled individuals. They place their commodity for sale in the labour market. The union must bid against the employers for the purchase of this commodity, for the hiring of these "able men." Naturally, when bid meets bid—when a labour union must compete against an employer or groups of employers for the "services" of this highly skilled gentry, the price of this commodity goes up. Ergo: the salaries of the trade union officers of the powerful unions go sky-rocketing.

Herein is to be found a basic cause for the frequency with which trade union leaders are often simultaneously subsidised by the capitalists and paid by the unions for "services rendered." Only a few months ago it was shown that Frank Farrington, President of Dis-

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trict 12, Illinois, of the United Mine Workers of America, was on the pay roll of the Peabody Coal Company, one of the biggest and most vicious union-hating coal operators in the country, at the salary of twenty-five thousand dollars a year while he was drawing pay from the miners' union.

Reactionary Labour officials defeated in union elections often get on the pay roll of a corporation in the industry of the union which repudiated them. But the Labour movement is on the whole so backward, so deficient in class consciousness, that it seldom attaches odium to such a going over to the capitalist class under these circumstances. A trade union official of this type will often openly admit that he is "in it for what he can get out of it."

"Across the Table"

(2) The second reason given for the big salaries exacted by the Labour lieutenants from the trade unions is that the Labour union representatives must live and feel on a parity with the men, with the wealthy employers, "across the table" in negotiations! These leaders maintain that in order to get the best contracts for their unions with the bosses they must live on a swell scale, live in the same hotels with the employers and dress and act like them in every other way possible. These union officials consistently exhibit a strong desire to be on the best personal terms with the exploiters. They consider it an achievement and a significant mark of their skill as labour leaders if they can be on such intimate terms with the bosses as to call them by their first names.

Of course, the international presidents usually consider the "across the table" method as the most effective and the only way of conducting a struggle against the capitalists. They detest action by the workers themselves, such as effective mass picketing, demonstrations and huge protests against government strike-breaking or intolerable working and living conditions. It must be said, however, that the high-priced Labour leaders of some of the unions often resort to hiring professional gangsters to beat up scabs. The use of professional gangsters has also been resorted to with too great frequency to exterminate militants in the trade unions, to conduct a savage warfare of violence against Communists. This practice is especially characteristic of certain so-called Socialist trade union officials in some of the needle trades unions.

A Labour Convention Auction.

Let me present a highly illuminating case which will illustrate the characteristics and attitudes of the aristocrats among the high-priced leaders of the American trade union movement. At the last convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, one of the oldest and most powerful trade unions in the United States, William B. Prenter, now Grand International President of this organisation, in discussing the report of the Committee on salaries protested against the recommendation that his salary be limited to twenty-five thousand dollars a year, and said:

"You have elected me for a term of three years. The Brotherhood of the Locomotive Engineers' Co-operative National Bank in Cleveland has elected me their

First Vice-President and Cashier. I am holding various positions in your financial interests. I am the Secretary-Treasurer of your Holding Company, a Brotherhood Corporation. I am the Secretary-Treasurer of your Investment Company, a corporation controlled by the Brotherhoods and owned by the stockholders of the general public and others. I am the President of your Nottingham Savings Bank, owned and controlled by the Holding Company. I am a Director and Vice-President of your Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers Trust Company of New York. I am the Vice-President of the Locomotive Engineers National Bank of Boston, Massachusetts, owned by the Brotherhood. I am a Director and sit on the Executive Board of the Empire Trust Company. I am a Trustee for the interests of the Investment Company, the Holding Company, and the Brotherhood, in all your other activities in the Transportation Brotherhood Bank of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the bank in Birmingham, Alabama. And I would much prefer that you would designate what you want to pay me as Treasurer for your Brotherhood, your Insurance and Pension Department, and let me make whatever arrangements I want for the duties that I am required to perform in connection with your other interests.

"The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers Co-operative National Bank has several vice-presidents with salaries ranging from six to ten thousand dollars and you expect me to go into that bank and resume the responsibilities of its Cashier and on a salary of five thousand dollars a year.

"I will not do it. If I am not worth more than that to these institutions, they haven't got the right man, and I am not wedded to the job."

Twenty-five Thousand Not Enough

Mr. Prenter objected to being paid a flat salary of twenty-five thousand dollars a year for all his offices lumped. He wants to be paid handsomely for all the above-mentioned titles, individually and separately. When he was asked by one of the Convention delegates how he found the time to do all this work, he answered: "Mostly by working twenty-four hours a day." Prenter continued:

"You fellows expect me to sit across the table from fellows making twenty-five thousand dollars a year. It can't be done unless I get enough money to command their respect and keep my own self-respect. . . . If I'm good enough to represent your interests with twenty-five thousands dollars a year men, then I am good enough to make as near that sum as the union can afford."

A delegate, Ferguson by name, with a sense of humour and with some sense of duty to his organisation then said:

"Brother Prenter no doubt is worth may be to this organisation a hundred thousand dollars a year, but when he gets up there and tells us his duties and responsibilities and the different offices he holds, it seems to me that Brother Prenter is overtaxed with responsibilities. He has been elected or has been appointed to more positions than it is humanly possible for one man to fill. . . . When you stop to think a bit, what are you paying these brothers (grand officers) to-day? If you look at it in that light—I haven't figured it up, but it is in the neighbourhood of thirty dollars a day. That is a pretty good salary, when you stop to consider what the men are receiving who are paying for it. . . ."

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But then a delegate by the name of Burke rose to the defence of Prenter by saying:

"You certainly are not going to make your chief executives sit across the table from men in the railroad organisations who are getting a higher salary? You certainly are not going to take the pep right out of your new assistant grand chief by making him sit across the table from a man who is getting three or four thousand dollars more a year? Certainly you don't mean that? . . ."

Then Mr. Stone (now deceased) who was formerly Grand Chief, spoke up and addressed the delegates:

"You want the highest pay in the world for yourselves and you are the cheapest lot of men in the world to work for when it comes down to salaries. You put these men across the table against fifty-thousand dollar, seventy-five thousand dollar and a hundred thousand dollar a year men to represent what? To represent you. You expect them to get results and you expect them to win out. You put them up against the keenest, shrewdest and brainiest lot of men in the world who draw the best salaries in the world."

This talk got under the skin of a rank and file delegate, Miehle, who leaped to his feet and declared:

"I would like to see every Grand officer we have paid a decent salary, but I can't see anything in the argument produced by you Brothers when you talk about being paid 15,000 dollars, or 25,000 dollars, and talking across the table to men getting 100,000 dollars or 125,000 dollars. I have been paid 150 dollars (monthly) and in some cases less, the last twenty-five years, and I have been talking across the table to superintendents who were getting three times as much as I was. If you are going to raise the salaries of the Grand Officers so they can talk across the table with some Vice-President, let's do that for the rank and file back home, too."

What Price Labour Leaders?

We have quoted at length from the confidential minutes of the last convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers in order to give an accurate picture of the type of leadership now dominating some of the strongest trade unions in America. Let us proceed to tabulate the salaries of the officers of some of the leading trade unions of the United States:

Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers: President \$25,000; First Vice-President \$15,000; Grand Chief Engineer \$13,000.

American Federation of Musicians: President \$12,000; Secretary \$7,500.

Painters, Paperhangers and Interior Decorators: President \$6,000; Secretary \$6,000.

Carpenters and Joiners: President \$7,500.

Bricklayers and Masons: President \$10,000; Secretary \$10,000.

Structural Iron Workers: President \$7,500; Secretary \$6,000.

Order of Railway Conductors: President \$12,000; Secretary \$8,000; Vice-Presidents (7) \$6,000; Senior Vice-President \$8,000.

Stage Employees: President \$6,000.

Maintenance of Way Men (Railroads): President \$14,000; Secretary \$9,000.

Locomotive Firemen: President \$12,000; Secretary \$10,000.

Street Car Railway men: President \$6,000.

Railroad Trainmen: President \$14,000.

Railway Clerks: President \$10,000.

Machinists: President \$7,500; Secretary \$6,500.

Railway Carmen: President \$7,400.

Teamsters and Truckdrivers: President \$15,000; Secretary \$15,000; Auditor \$15,000; Vice-Presidents (7) \$10,000; Trustees (3) \$10,000; Organisers \$10,000.

Barbers: President \$7,000.

United Mine Workers: President \$8,000; Vice-President \$7,000.

Electrical Workers: President \$7,000; Secretary \$6,500.

We must reckon with the fact that some of these trade union officials get in addition to their regular salaries as high as \$19 a day for living expenses when they are travelling. Some of them are allowed regularly throughout the year \$5.00 a day in addition to their salary for incidental expenses. Many of them are corrupt and make plenty of money through betraying the workers in their struggles. Many of them draw additional salaries as officers of labour banks and trade union financial institutions. A large number of them own substantial blocs of stock and securities in big corporations.

The Price the Workers Pay

The American trade unionists are paying annually a hundred million dollars to their organisations. Most of this huge sum goes towards the payment of wages and salaries of officers. At best, what the organised workers receive in return, nowadays, is the maintenance of the status quo. For some unions even this cannot be said about their leadership.

A number of the unions have their executive committees divided into various departments. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, for instance, has an Insurance and Pension Department, an Investment Department, and the lowest of the departments is the labour, or trade union department. This is one of the most powerful American labour unions!

The workers in the aristocracy of Labour, the highly skilled workers, are getting a few crumbs from the wealth-laden tables of the American imperialists now enjoying world hegemony. The greatest beneficiaries of American imperialism in the ranks of the Labour organisations are the International Officers of the unions of highly skilled workers, the leaders of the organisations of the aristocracy of the American working class.

Not "One Reactionary Mass"

There is a great gap between the imperialist prowess of the United States and the imperialist strength of the other leading capitalist national groups. There is likewise a gap between the extent to which the trade union bureaucracy of some of the less powerful capitalist countries has been corrupted and the debauching of the reactionary high trade union officialdom of the American trade union movement. There is a positive and direct relationship between these gaps.

But let no one make the mistake of viewing as one homogenous mass the entire American Labour aristocracy. Let no one make the mistake of viewing as a

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homogeneous group even the entire American trade union officialdom. Already there are the bases for serious differentiations and divisions even in the ranks of the trade union officialdom. The bases for these differences, of course, are deeply rooted in the economic conditions of the country—in each instance specifically in the economic status of the particular industry in which the union happens to be found, in the extent of skill of the workers unionised, etc.

The American Communists correctly view this corruption of trade union officialdom and the slight benefits to the several millions of skilled workers as a result of the strength of Yankee imperialism to-day, but only as a temporary condition. The American Communists are also beginning to react in a realistic manner to the potential and existing differences not only in the American working class as a whole, but also in the various sections of the working class and in the trade union leadership.