

Shop Delegate League in Needle Trades

By Rose Wortis

THE International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, in common with the rest of the labor movement, has felt the evil effects of dual unionism. Although there has never been a dual union in the ladies' garment industry, yet the radicals there have been very much influenced by the teachings of the outside unions, and many spent years in a futile effort to organize a Textile Workers' branch of the I. W. W., which did not and could not perform the functions of a trade union. All that they accomplished by their efforts was to isolate themselves from the mass of the workers. During periods of strikes they rallied to the support of the union, but only to retire to their seclusion when the struggle was over.

There were attempts made to remedy this condition, for the radical workers instinctively felt the barrenness of their efforts; but these failed because the fallacy of dual unionism was not yet understood. The propaganda groups that were organized had no definite plan of action, and their members refused to accept positions of responsibility. Thus the Current Events Group, which at one time promised to become a factor in the union, failed to come up to expectations; the same reasons account for the failure of the Workers' Council movement in the I. L. G. W. after the 12-week strike in 1919.

The Workers' Council came into existence at the time when the Shop Steward movement was being heard of a great deal from England, and it was considerably influenced by the British events. It aimed to reconstruct the union on a Shop Delegate system. The idea was to make the shop the unit of organization, to transfer the full control of the union to the rank and file through their Shop Committees. The women in the needle trades (contrary to accepted opinion that women are by nature conservative) readily responded to the new idea. The Workers' Council became very popular amongst all the workers in the industry, because the principles advocated by it were particularly adaptable to conditions in the industry.

The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union has faced many peculiar problems. Although in existence but a few years, it has succeeded to a great extent in improving the conditions of the workers. In order to evade the power of the union, the manufacturers began to transfer the industry into small towns, where it is more difficult for the union to reach the workers. In the city many of the large shops were

disbanded and the industry handed over to contractors. The large number of the rank and file does not participate actively in the affairs of the organization as now constituted; in order to maintain the standards of the union it became necessary to mobilize the active elements and distribute them through the unorganized shops, so that from the inside could be spread the message of unionism. These problems of the unorganized and the out-of-town shop, among other difficulties, had become too serious to be handled by paid officials against whom workers have a distrust. Only by organizing the union on a basis that would enlist greater numbers into its activities could the union hope to maintain itself.

The Workers' Council offered a solution for these problems; but it was doomed to failure because, instead of acting as a propaganda group it aimed to replace the union and even undertook to conduct strikes. Also the radicals of all the different shades of thought had not learned how to reach a common program and leave their differences aside while working for the agreed end; instead of this, each group tried to use the Council as a medium for the propagation of its pet ideas.

In spite of its mistakes, the Workers' Council accomplished some good work. It popularized the Shop Delegates System, and it compelled the officials who were desirous of enlisting the activities of the radicals (the only live wires in the organization) to grant them a concession. This took the form of the organization of a Shop Delegates body in the union. The new institution was greeted with enthusiasm by the workers in the industry, who attended its meetings in great numbers, and a new spirit permeated the organization. This new body began to assume responsibilities, and soon decided that the Executive Committee, hitherto elected by the membership at large and responsible to no one during its term of office, should be elected and controlled by the Shop Representatives.

The officers of the I. L. G. W. became alarmed at the popularity of the new institution and its acts and immediately took steps to curb it. They declared the decision of the Shop Delegates unconstitutional, and sent in a receiver to take charge of the office of the local. Some of the radicals, still imbued with the idea of dual unionism, began to clamor for a split; but they were immediately opposed by others who had learned that the only way to revolutionize the union was

to stick to it. The saner counsels prevailed. They analyzed their mistakes, and patiently set themselves to the task of organizing a left-wing movement in the I. L. G. W. They have learned that a fundamental change in the form of organization cannot be accomplished on a local scale, but must begin throughout the organization and with the highest and lowest units.

The patient and systematic work which was undertaken by this left wing has been fruitful. We now see a solid block of radicals organized in Shop Delegates Leagues, with branches in nearly every local of the I. L. G. W., in New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis, and other centers where ladies' garments are made. The members of the Shop Delegates League aim to get the support of the rank and file by participating in the daily activities of the union, and by patient and diligent work in the interest of the workers. The recent organization campaign conducted by the Joint Board of Waist and Dress Industry was largely carried on by the radicals. The success of these new policies has become evident during the recent election in the cloak industry—the stronghold of the official machine.

At the elections just held, after a two months' campaign during which the official machine in co-operation with the Daily Forward did their utmost to discredit the radicals, a complete victory was achieved, in the largest local in the organization. They elected their full slate, executive board, managers, and delegates to the convention. The program upon which the fight was waged, as enunciated in the Shop Delegate League bulletin, is as follows:

1. To bring about the reconstruction of the union along Industrial lines.

2. To make the union a more militant and efficient organ of struggle by transferring power from union officials to the workers in the shops.

3. To abolish the sanctity of the collective agreement as a permanent institution.

4. To encourage solidarity of the labor forces of different industries, thereby strengthening the economic and social position of the working class.

The Shop Delegate League is now carrying on a spirited campaign for the election of delegates to the convention of the I. L. G. W., which is to take place in May. The convention issues are:

Rank and file control through Shop Delegates.
Needle Trades Alliance.

Equal representation on all bodies of the International.

Establishment of Recall of Officers.

Uniform initiation fees, etc.

Should the Shop Delegates League succeed in electing even a good minority of delegates to the convention, as it undoubtedly will, the convention will prove to be one of the most interesting in the history of our union. At last the radicals have found the road that leads to victory. It may not be a smooth road, and it may cost a few individual suspensions, and even expulsions, but in spite of all, thanks to our present knowledge of how to work in our unions, the day is not far distant when our International Ladies' Garment Workers Union will take its place in the front ranks of Organized Labor in America.

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

In The Labor Herald for June

"The Story of the Railway Employees' Department Convention"

By Wm. Z. Foster

It will be a most complete report and analysis of this most important labor convention, and written by a thoroughly posted authority on railroad unionism. You must read it.

Some other features of the June issue are: several special articles on the Building Trades situation; a story of the development of machinery in office work; another of Fritz Heckert's stories of the German labor movement; and the usual assortment of interesting and indispensable articles on every phase of the labor movement.