

# Program of the Needle Trades

## Preamble

At a period when the working class is being dealt heavy, crushing blows by the arrogant exploiters; when the unions led by partly corrupt and generally cowardly officials are succumbing one after another to the onslaughts of the capitalist class, the Trade Union Educational League is the only hope for a regeneration of the American trade union movement.

The League is uniting in its ranks the militant workers of all trades; those elements who alone are willing and

capable of reorganizing the workers and stiffening their power of resistance. Its program of amalgamation is the crying need of the movement. It is absolutely right when it declares that the labor movement is confronted with the alternative of amalgamation or annihilation.

In the struggle against the reactionary leadership of the American trade union movement, the unions of the needle trades can play an important role. Composed as they are of a more class-conscious and militant element, they should set an inspiring example to workers in other industries. Before this can be accomplished, however, these unions them-

selves must be reorganized on a new basis and infused with a new spirit. To carry on this necessary work of reorganization; to further the agitation for the amalgamation of the unions in the industry and for the establishment of the shop delegate system; to make the workers of the needle trades realize that they have a vital part to play in the American labor movement;—that is the purpose and work of the needle trades section of the Trade Union Educational League.

#### Amalgamation

Why are we, the workers belonging to the Trade Union Educational League, in favor of the amalgamation of the unions in the needle industry? It is true that the unions in the needle industry have more of an industrial form of organization than the typical American trade union. In our industry there is no open scabbing of one craft upon another. The principle "one shop, one union," is already a fact. We are for amalgamation because we wish to extend this principle of "one shop, one union" to "one industry, one union."

The problems and interests of the workers in the needle trades are so closely bound together that there is absolutely no reason for the existence of more than one union in the industry and a crying need exists for our amalgamation into one powerful organization that can better protect and further our interests. That the interests of the needle workers are identical has been proved conclusively during the past few years. The victory of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers in their 44-hour week strike made it possible for all other needle trades to win this concession. On the other hand, the employers quickly took advantage of the defeat of the Furriers' strike in 1920 by attacking the other unions in the industry. The defeat or victory of one union reacts upon the other needle trades immediately. Their interests are one.

Amalgamation of all needle trades unions will greatly increase the fighting strength of the 350,000 workers in our industry. Amalgamation is a question of more power for the men and women engaged in making clothes. A really consolidated union of all the needle workers will prove to be a source of creative power for the good of the workers. Federation will not do. In fact, a loose alliance is a dangerous undertaking in the clothing industry. It would not add one iota of actual strength to the unions, but it would arouse the employers and stimulate an even greater degree of consolidation of their ranks. An alliance would provoke the employers to unite still further without giving a corresponding increase of power to the unions.

Federation as proposed by some of the union officials, may or may not be a step forward in the case of the typical American craft union. In the case of the needle workers, however, it is not a step forward. What is necessary, and what the situation demands, is a closely knit unification of all the needle trades.

Amalgamation of the needle trades will increase the strength of the general organization enormously. In times of industrial strife in any department, the employers will be faced with an array of power and determination to win which the unions now, acting separately, do not possess. The entire moral and financial strength of the unions would be thrown on the side of the workers, assuring their victory. Moreover, amalgamation of all the needle trades into one solid union will not only strengthen the needle trades themselves but will blaze the pathway for the amalgamation of all the other craft unions in other industries.

One amalgamated needle trades union, organized on the basis of the present lines of division, such as ladies' garments department, men's clothing workers, furriers, cap-makers, etc., with one central fund and one central staff in the national office, one district council of all trades in each district—would eliminate waste, duplication of effort, overlapping of administration, and make the union generally more effective.

To bring about this amalgamation the militants in every local union in the industry must begin to agitate for the calling of a special convention of all the unions in the needle trades, which shall formulate definite plans for amalgamation. Representation at such a convention should be on the basis of at least one delegate for every 5,000 members.

#### Shop Delegate System

The present form of local organization in the needle trades has outlived its usefulness and can no longer serve the purposes of militant unionism. The numerous local divisions tend to cause dissension in the ranks of the workers and to develop in them a spirit of local patriotism which is detrimental to the workers as a whole. The local union as the unit of organization might have served a useful purpose when the unions were first organized and the membership small. But now the local unions are largely political clubs and mostly lifeless. Usually a local with a membership of 10,000 can boast of no better attendance at meetings than

from 100 to 200. Through the local union meetings only a small fraction of the membership actively participates in the affairs of the organization. As a result it becomes possible for a group of paid officers to usurp all power. To the average worker the interests of the shop are distinct and separate from the interests of the union. The union is to him too often merely an office where he pays compulsory dues.

To establish a closer bond between the shop and the union, to arouse the initiative and individual activity of the rank and file, to transfer the power from the hands of the paid officers into those of the workers in the shops, and to abolish not only the local but also the craft divisions,—the present system must be changed and the shop delegate system established in its place. With the shop as the basic unit of the organization, the union will be conducted and controlled by the rank and file.

What is the shop delegate system? Under this system the workers at their regular shop meetings elect committees which administer the affairs of the shop and act as representatives of the workers in that shop at local councils, consisting of a specified number of shop representatives. The delegates in these local councils formulate policies, elect and control officers to the higher units and report back to their respective shops, thus linking up the problems of the union with those of the shop. In this way the union becomes the true expression of the needs of the workers in the industry. The Needle Trades Section of the T. U. E. L. states as one of its principal goals the establishment of the shop delegate system.

#### Program of Immediate Demands

As active workers in the union and the shop who are faced with the daily struggle, we propose a program to improve the working conditions in the shop while we are agitating for the amalgamation of all our unions into one industrial unit and the bringing about of the shop delegate system.

**Week Work:**—We declare the speed-up system in the form of piece work to be a method introduced by the capitalist class in order to exploit the workers more effectively. The piece work system is injurious to the health of the workers, and the competition which results from it is destructive of their solidarity. We will fight unceasingly for the abolition of the piece work system.

**Standards of Production:**—The militants in the needle trades unions will fight any proposal of week work with a standard of production. We recognize this system as only a disguised form of piece work, which will not abolish the evils of piece work. "Week work with a minimum wage" is our slogan.

**Consolidation of Locals:**—There are entirely too many local unions in the needle trades. We stand for the unification of all the locals of one craft, such as operators, pressers, etc., and of all the locals of one trade, such as coat makers, dress makers, etc.

**Employment Bureaus:**—We advocate the establishment of employment bureaus in the unions of the needle trades to eliminate the present acute competition of the workers when they apply at the shops for jobs advertised in the newspapers. This will give the unions control over the jobs in the industry, as already has been demonstrated by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers.

**Shop Chairman in an Advisory Capacity:**—Realizing that only through the establishment of the shop delegate system can the present evils in our unions be eliminated, and as a step in that direction, we advocate the establishment of a shop chairman body to meet regularly and to act in an advisory capacity in the unions. We will also support all progressive measures in the unions, such as recall of officers, referendums, proportional representation to the higher units of the organization, etc.

**Injunctions:**—The American labor movement since its beginning has fought against the use of injunctions. The injunction is the most powerful weapon the exploiters are using to crush labor unions. The American workers must destroy that weapon. For any union to use the injunction or to recognize its legitimacy, as did the International Ladies' Garment Workers, in the recent cloak makers strike in New York, confuses the workers and weakens their fight against the injunction. We will use all our power to oppose the employment of the injunction by any union in the future.

To familiarize the workers in our industry with this program, and to make the measures advocated a fact in the life of our organizations, groups of militants must be organized in every local union. All these groups should work jointly for the purpose of carrying on the educational campaign effectively throughout every branch of the industry.

With this program, the Needle Trades Section of the T. U. E. L. comes to the workers in the clothing industry. We ask those who are serious in their desire to make the union a strong weapon in the class struggle, to join hands with us in the fight for a better, stronger union controlled by the rank and file.