

Building Service Strike Bitter Lesson to Workers

By Rose Wortis

On March 2, New York witnessed the beginning of one of the most dramatic strikes in the history of organized labor in this city. After weeks of useless negotiations, thousands of building service workers responded to the call of the union, and went down on strike. This strike, for the first time, brought to the attention of the people of New York, in the most dramatic form, the fact that these men and women, employed by some of the biggest real estate companies in the swankiest hotels and apartment houses, were slaving inhumanly long hours, sometimes as long as 60 to 70 hours a week and for the miserable wage, as low as \$16 and \$14 a week, with the result that the building service employees won the sympathy, not only of the working population of New York City, but of large sections of the middle-class, who expressed their support on the picket line, and especially through the organization of the Tenants League of Greater New York City.

Today, the strike has been off for more than two weeks, without having realized any of the demands of the workers. Between 2,000 and 3,000 men are locked out and starving. This strike which could have marked a turning point in the movement for organization of the unorganized workers in New York City, has turned out to be a defeat for organized labor and a victory for the realty interests, the bankers, led by their rabid, anti-labor lawyer, Walter Gordon Merritt, the same individual who attempted to prevent the solidarity between the longshoremen and teamsters through an injunction.

The Reasons, Lessons

What are the reasons for this defeat of the workers? And what are the lessons of this strike for the labor movement?

In order to fully understand and appreciate these lessons, it is necessary to go back a little into the recent history of the Building Service Union. After many years of effort toward organization on the part of the more advanced section of the workers in this industry, a strong movement for organization developed in the building service trade in the early part of 1935, which resulted in a general strike which was settled through the Curran Award. Though this settlement was far from satisfactory, it registered some gains for the workers in wage increases, shortening of hours and union recognition.

Under a militant leadership, this partial victory could have been used to consolidate the forces of the union, develop a broad rank and file leadership and prepare for further struggles to complete the organization of this most exploited section of the New York workers as well as to establish decent standards in the trade. However, the top leadership of the building ser-

vice employees, especially the National leadership, have no conception of what progressive leadership means. They represent the worst types of reactionary A. F. L. officials, who have no confidence in the workers and to whom a trade union is a business proposition. Most prominent among the leaders is Mr. Bambrick, orator, who though often mouthing militant phrases, has proven himself in the recent strike to be a dangerous obstacle on the way to success for the workers.

The partial victory in the last strike created a lot of enthusiasm amongst the workers who realized that this was their first step in the direction of building a powerful union. The workers began to take a real interest in the union, and began to press for the full enforcement of the Curran Award, and a say in the affairs of their union.

Stifling By Leadership

The leadership of the union sensed in this rising interest of the workers in their union affairs, a danger to their policy of a one man leadership, and exerted every possible effort to stifle the expression of the rank and file. When the workers persisted in their activities and developed a strong rank and file movement, the leadership initiated a series of reorganizations, dissolving the various local unions, some of which were under rank and file leadership, and suspended a number of the militant workers, as the secretary of the Bronx local, which was making real headway, and substituted these rank and file leaders by discredited people of the type of the present Bronx Secretary, Abrams, who had been associated with the worst racketeers of the Purling Chauffeurs Union.

Mr. Bambrick, who at times flirted with the rank and file, was the willing tool of the national officials in carrying through the disorganizations in the union. These reorganizations coming during the formative period of the Union, greatly weakened the forces of the Union and was taken full advantage of by the Realty Board.

When the present agreement expired in January, the workers rallied in the most enthusiastic manner around the union. The meetings called in preparation for the strike were the most enthusiastic. The demands formulated by the union for shorter hours, increases in wages, and especially the closed shop, caught the imagination, not only of the organized workers, but of thousands who had not yet joined the ranks of the Union. These workers felt that in establishing the closed shop in the industry, they would have the only guarantee against the abuses suffered at the hands of the Realty Board. However, while the workers were mobilizing to fight for their demands, the leadership of the union maneuvered with the bosses, without consulting the workers.

Garment Section Settlement

They reached a settlement with the building owners in the Garment Center, at that time the strongest and the best organized section of the Union. This settlement was made without regard to the effect that it would have on the general strike. The workers were speaking strike and demanding strike action, the leadership of the union never gave a serious thought to the organization of the general strike. They adopted a policy of basing themselves almost exclusively on press publicity, in the hope that in that way they would bluff the Realty owners into granting certain concessions.

They did not realize that the last strike and the earnestness with which the workers took their union had taught the Realty owners that this union was a serious matter, and that a favorable settlement in the building service trade would be a great stimulant to the thousands of other workers in New York City, who are slaving under open shop conditions. The best proof of this fact is that throughout the weeks of negotiations during which the Realty Board adopted all measures to break the strike, raising a fund of hundreds of thousands of dollars for strikebreaking and showing in an unmistakable way that it was preparing for a show-down, the Union did practically nothing to build up a real strike apparatus essential to the conduct of a strike spread over such a large area.

The leadership took no steps to prepare the rank and file for active participation in the strike; raised no funds to fight the millionaire Realty owners; took no steps to rally the support of the hundreds of thousands of organized workers in New York City. The first days of the strike revealed the bankruptcy of the leadership of the Building Service Employees Union.

Conduct of the Strike

While there was no organization, no strike committee, no hall committee, no relief committee, no strike apparatus whatsoever, the enthusiasm of the workers ran so high that without any leadership or guidance from the Union officials, the workers of their own accord formed flying squads and quickly extended the strike, meeting with the most enthusiastic response from the workers. In many instances, the leadership of the Union which gave out glowing statements about spreading the strike, deliberately discouraged, and often even stopped the flying squads from extending the strike to new buildings and new sections.

The first blow to the strike, initiated by the Realty owners, came through Mayor LaGuardia. This mayor, who was elected to office as a friend of labor, in the strike of the building service employees, even more than in any other previous strike in New York City, exposed himself as a handy tool of the big Real Estate interests. Instead of throwing in support to the tens of thousands of miserably exploited workers in the building service strike, who were fighting for the most elementary needs, the strike-

breaking Mayor LaGuardia, immediately rallied to the support of the millionaire bankers. Under the excuse of an "emergency" the mayor issued his "proclamations," in which he mobilized the Civil Service employees as strikebreakers against the building service employees. This strikebreaking of the city administration greatly stimulated the private strikebreaking agencies, operated by the most infamous thugs, who began a wholesale importation of the underworld into New York City, with the knowledge of the police. When mass pressure forced an investigation of one of these agencies, it revealed that out of 38 arrested, twelve had jail sentences. These same people who support the so-called crime legislation, opened the doors of New York City and the homes of thousands of New York residents to the most vicious criminals.

Reaction to LaGuardia

What was the reaction of the union leadership to the strikebreaking activities of Mayor LaGuardia? Instead of rallying the strikers to fight the attempts to break their strike; instead of mobilizing hundreds of thousands of organized workers of New York City against the LaGuardia strikebreaking order; instead of the Union taking upon itself in an organized way the responsibility of supplying emergency crews as was done in many instances in the experience of organized labor as in the San Francisco general strike, the Pekin, Ill., general strike, etc., Bambrick, the leader of the strike, gave his approval to the LaGuardia order, stating to the press and to the strikers, that he had no objection to the action of the mayor and would co-operate with him. Instead of organizing a mass campaign against the thugs employed as strikebreakers, who were perpetrating acts of terror against the strikers, Bambrick and Scalise made promises to District Attorney Dodge that they would help to apprehend any striker who tried to defend himself against the onslaught of the thugs.

While the workers were fighting most enthusiastically on the picket line for the demands of the closed shop and were on the way of forcing the Realty owners to submit to their justified demands by their organized power, Bambrick, above the heads of the strikers, in a most shameful way, made one retreat after another on the demands of the workers, giving up the closed shop, and agreeing to send the workers back and to submit all the demands of the workers to the Arbitration Board appointed by Mayor LaGuardia, the same mayor who was doing his utmost to break the backbone of the strike. The Mayor who had issued daily threats against the strikers, suddenly changed his tactics and came out in support of Bambrick. He realized that this was a subtle way of breaking the strike and at the same time appearing as the friend of labor. This same mayor who was so firm against the strikers has since not uttered a word against the Realty Board which openly flouted the decisions of the Arbitration Board. And this retreat of Bambrick had a fatal effect on the final outcome of the strike.

The Realty owners took full advantage of the retreat of the Union leaders, pressing not only for the defeat of the demands, but for crushing the union itself.

The Settlement

The final so-called settlement, made at the time when the strike was at its height, and when the workers had gained the mass support of the tenants and the public generally, will be recorded as one of the most shameful pages in the annals of organized labor. Through this settlement, the reality owners, the bankers and open shoppers of New York have secured a signal victory against organized labor. This defeat was brought by Bambrick as a great victory to the workers. At the time when the Realty owners and their labor hating, Walter Gordon Merritt, were gloating over the defeat they administered to the Union, Bambrick was singing songs of praise to the humanitarian mayor and to the Arbitration Board for the great service they had rendered to the building service workers. In a speech to the press, Mr. Bambrick was quoted as saying: "The mayor went miles out of his way to help us."

The workers, without having read the terms of the settlement, sensed the defeat, but were given no opportunity to discuss the settlement or vote on it. While the workers were still questioning the meaning of the settlement, the Realty Board had already completed its plans for a mass lockout of the workers. The very same committee which signed the agreement of the Mayor's Committee, sent out a letter to its members telling them that they are not obliged to accept the settlement.

Workers Enraged

The mass meeting held a few days after the settlement of the strike, at New Star Casino, showed the real temper of the workers, who were so enraged against the leadership that Bambrick would have been driven out of the hall if it had not been for the intervention of a militant worker who realized that this would not be to the advantage of the workers at that time, and who instead, came forward with a concrete plan of how to intensify the struggle for the reinstatement of the locked-out men and other measures necessary to maintain the union.

Even after the defeat of the strike, the policy of the leadership, particularly Bambrick, has not changed one bit. Again he flouted the will of the membership. The unanimous decision carried by the New Star Casino meeting for setting up a committee from each Council, for the calling of a closed shop membership meeting, have been ignored. Up to date, despite the acute suffering of the workers, this has been ignored.

(To Be Continued)

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