

Role of the Trade Unions In Building Service Strike

By Rose Wortis

Article II

The most tragic page in the history of organized labor was written in New York during the strike of the building service workers.

This strike from the very beginning was more than an ordinary strike between a group of employers and workers. It took on the character of a real battle between the organized labor and the organized open shop interests. It involved the most fundamental issues—the right of the workers to be organized. The capitalist press realized its full significance and printed the most vicious attacks on the strikers. The metropolitan press, with the exception of the New York Evening Post, called for the breaking of the strike.

The reality interests used as their lawyer the most vicious anti-labor and red-baiter, Walter Gordon Merritt.

In this situation, when the enemies of labor rallied in the most concerted manner behind the reality interests, the leadership of the New York organized labor movement showed its lack of the most elementary understanding of class solidarity.

When the strikebreaking order of LaGuardia was issued, there was hardly any comment from the leaders of organized labor with the exception, of course, of some of the progressives. No wonder that Mayor LaGuardia was so impudent with his daily attacks on the workers.

Central Labor Council Falls

What a different situation we would have seen if the 700,000 organized workers of New York had actively rallied to the support of the building service workers and had voiced their resentment against this open strikebreaking program. Even Mayor LaGuardia would have been compelled to sit up and listen. Not even at the meeting of the Central Trades, held during the first week of the strike, was there any comment on open attacks against organized labor.

The Central Trades and Labor Council adopted a resolution to support the strike, but for all practical purposes, this strike might have taken place on the equator. No machinery was set up to assist; no call issued to the various unions for support; no steps taken to raise finances; no steps taken to make clear the issues involved in the strike. The secretary did not even take the trouble to communicate to the affiliated unions the formal motion made. Even at the last Council meeting held at the time after the Labor Board had openly flaunted the agreement of the 4,000 men were locked out, the bureaucracy of the Central Trades shut off the discussion and adjourned the meeting, over the most indignant protest of the mass of the delegates who were on their feet demanding the continuation of the discussion and real steps in support of the locked-out men.

One Characterization

The best way to characterize the attitude of the leadership of the Central Trades and Labor Council towards this strike around the fundamental issues of the right to organize, can be seen in a remark made by one of the leaders at the conclusion of the meeting. "Well," he said, "Jim [Bambrick] will have to go back to printing." (Bambrick was formerly active in the Printers' Union). But this strike will have taught the workers the lesson that

Mayor's Committee, and close to in order to have a union to fight for their interests, they will have to build it on their own collective strength and leadership.

The building service workers had the support of thousands of rank and file workers and the trade unionists and a number of unions under militant leadership, especially the Fur Workers which not only gave the workers financial support, protested against the LaGuardia action, but actively organized their active workers for the picketline and the flying squadrons.

The Communists

From the very first days of the strike, the Communists in the union took the leadership in organizing squads. The Party organizations in a number of sections set up relief kitchens and began to collect food for the strikers. The Party immediately began a publicity campaign through the columns of the Daily Worker and leaflets to popularize the issues of the strike and to initiate a movement of the tenants. The Communists were in the forefront and played a leading role in the organization of the Tenants' League; called a number of neighborhood meetings and a mass meeting in Mecca Temple, supported the workers on the picket line, raised funds for the workers and were instrumental in winning back jobs and even wage increases for hundreds of workers.

The Militant Socialists, though not as active as our Party, assigned many of their Party and Y.P.S.L. members for strike activity and participated in the Tenants' League, and gave encouragement and help to the strikers.

Political Leadership of Our Party

Our Party reacted more promptly and more effectively to this strike than in any previous strike in the history of New York. However, the shortcoming in our work in this strike was insufficient political leadership and guidance to the strikers.

Despite many decisions carried in our Party on the importance of trade union work, only a small section of our Party members in the building service were active in the union and known to the workers. This group was weakened as a result of the suspensions and persecutions, so that while our Party comrades were very active on the picket line and in the forefront of the struggle, they did not have sufficient strength to influence the conduct of the strike. The leaflets issued by the District Committee and the various sections though playing up the issues of the strike, did not devote sufficient attention to the directives to the Party members and workers for the strengthening of the strike.

The same is true of the Daily Worker. The Daily Worker gave splendid publicity to the strike (from the point of view of news), but the political character of the work in the Daily Worker was largely lacking. In our eagerness to cooperate with the leadership to make the strike more effective, we adopted a very uncritical attitude towards the leadership. In only one editorial, on Friday, March 6, did we bring forward the weaknesses of the strike and the need for involving the rank and file. While we correctly directed our attack against the strike-breaking activities of the city administration, we did not caution the workers against the danger of a one-man leadership, and the policy of retreat pursued by Bambrick and the International leadership, and in the case of the La

Guardia's Proclamation — on the question of arbitration.

Failed to Give Practical Aid

While the workers gladly and enthusiastically received our leaflets and the Daily Worker, it was not of much practical assistance to them in fighting the wrong policies of the leadership and exerting the mass pressure on this leadership since we did not come forth with concrete proposals.

Even through the most crucial period, when Bambrick declared the settlement a great victory for the workers, our Party comrades who understood the character of this settlement, failed to assert themselves and failed to make a fight for the floor to show the workers the real dangers involved in this settlement.

The Daily Worker was much too cautious in its comments of the settlement, going out of its way to soften the criticism. At the time when the workers were openly revolting, when the bosses defied the agreement reached with the Mayor's Committee, our editorials characterized the settlement as "far from satisfactory."

(To Be Continued)

7 Organizations, Y.C.L. To Picket Olympic Games

The Young Communist League District Office has announced full participation in the picketing of the Olympic elimination basketball games which start at Madison Square Garden tomorrow at 5:30 o'clock.

In a statement issued by the District Office, the members of the Young Communist League were called upon "to cooperate with the League Against War and Fascism, the American Students Union, Young Judea, New Dance League, American Jewish Congress, American Youth Congress and the Agenda Club of the Union Theological Seminary, in the move to keep the Olympics out of Germany by impressing upon the public the importance of not patronizing the basketball games since a percentage of the admission fees goes toward the Olympic Fund."

The statement continued with a reminder that it is still possible to move the Olympics from Germany, "through a concerted drive urging a national boycott of affairs which swell the Olympic Fund. A full picket line on Friday will be a direct blow against Hitler, fascism and his policy which is leading towards war."

Prison Life With Mooney Is I.L.D. Officer's Speech

Frank Spector, recently elected State Secretary of the New York International Labor Defense, will deliver his first speech since his election tonight at the Steve Kavalis Branch of the I. L. D., 144 Second Avenue, where he will talk on "Behind Prison Walls With Tom Mooney."

Spector, sentenced to San Quentin Prison in California because of his union activities in the Imperial Valley several years ago, was with Tom Mooney in prison and is well acquainted with America's oldest political prisoner. Admission to the meeting will be free and refreshments will be served.