

ILGWU Members Say 'Bring Back Our Militant Traditions'

The ILGWU Elections: Their Significance To the Progressive Labor Movement

by
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In recent days, the old talk about death and liquidation of its Communists is again being revived and finds its way into the front pages and editorials of the press, this time in connection with the elections in the locals of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union.

Since these elections have become a matter of general interest, it is important for the readers of the Daily Worker to know the actual facts and have a real evaluation of the recent happenings in the ILGWU. For a better understanding of present events a little background will be helpful.

The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union was one of the first unions that attempted, in 1923, to meet the issues raised by the mass of its progressive and militant members with regard to trade and general labor questions by a policy of expelling the militants. This led to a period of the sharpest internal conflict lasting for many years.

Through this policy of internal disruption, aided by the crisis when all unions were under the sharpest attack, the reactionary leadership almost led the union to destruction.

PERIOD OF UNITY

With the beginning of partial recovery in 1933, the advent of the New Deal, and, above all, as a result of the militant actions of the workers in which the left forces played an important role, the Union once more established its control in the industry and shortly afterwards the ranks of the union were united.

This renewed unity in the union ranks opened a vigorous period in the life of the Union.

Many of the policies advocated by the militants, for which they had been expelled, such as industrial unionism, Labor Party, organization of cultural activities, participation in the general progressive movement, became the adopted policies of the International. This new turn in the life of the Union gave rise to renewed enthusiasm in the ranks of the members.

It was during this period that the ILGWU joined hands with the miners and other progressive unions in initiating the CIO, in building the American Labor Party—a policy which for the first time was expressive of the sentiments of the rank and file.

The 1937 Convention, despite some weaknesses and vacillations, was the peak in the life and progress of the ILGWU.

The Convention registered almost 100 per cent organization of the industry with thousands of new recruits in the ranks drawn from among the young, inexperienced but enthusiastic workers who were ready to help build and fortify the union which freed them from the sweatshop system.

The convention distinguished itself in its positive stand on major issues which were of importance to the workers in the industry and the working class generally.

In the face of the sharpest attacks from the reactionaries, the pro-Franco elements and the Hearsts, the Convention placed itself unequivocally on the side of the Loyalists, generously giving financial and moral support for the cause of Spanish and world democracy.

But already at this Convention the contrast between the new spirit of the workers and the

leadership which was being dragged along by events was apparent. The openly anti-CIO forces remained entrenched in leading posts. Dubinsky tried to occupy a middle position between the CIO and the Forward clique, always veered in their direction because of his fear and mistrust of the workers and the left wing forces. The compromise resolution adopted on the CIO left the door open for continued maneuvers by the openly hostile anti-CIO elements.

Never really enthusiastic about the formation of the CIO, Dubinsky and company utilized the first attack of reaction in the country, the defeat of the "Little Steel" strike, the new drive of reaction to disaffiliate the ILGWU from the CIO. Dubinsky always felt more at home with Matthew Woll than with John L. Lewis. In this policy which now more and more is an open attack on the CIO policies and support of the position of Green, Woll and company, the Dubinskys have the support of the Forward crowd, the Thomasites, Lovestonites and Trotzkyites.

The reversal of policy on this fundamental question of the relation of the ILGWU to the general labor movement marked a radical departure from the progressive policies of the 1937 Convention and inevitably affected the internal policies of the Union. The president of the International, who had never really broken with reaction, and whose progressivism was only skin deep, reverted to his old red-baiting and splitting policies.

The Forward-Abe Cahn-Waldman clique again became the unseen power determining the



course of action on the part of the leadership. In this new course, the leadership, in the first place, renewed its attacks against the Communists and progressive elements—through the Lovestonites, Trotzkyites and Socialists, Hearst, Martin Dies—outside and inside of the CIO. They connived secretly with the Homer Martins to split the Auto Workers' Union, supporting every effort to divide and weaken the CIO in the interest of Matthew Woll and Hutcheson.

UNION IS HAMPERED

This new course immediately affected the life of the Union. It hampered the growing unity in the ranks of the workers. It weakened the attempts to really tackle the basic, unsolved problems in the industry, such as the real unionization of Brooklyn, enforcement of union control in the New York and out-of-town shops,

activation of the membership, etc. David Dubinsky, the president of the International, gave his blessing to all the disgruntled elements who remained outside of the united front. Despite the decision of the Convention against groups, these elements, under the leadership of the Forward clique, were given every encouragement to disrupt the united front and to interfere with the work of the union.

With the outbreak of the war and its accompanying anti-Red hysteria, Dubinsky and his supporters entered into an unholy crusade against all anti-war forces, all progressive elements inside and outside the Union. Especially are they bitter in their hatred for and attack against the Soviet Union.

To the "credit" of Dubinsky, Antonini and Zimmerman stands the initiation of the campaign of disruption in the ALP and the attempt to permit the ALP to become an instrument to promote the war plans of the American and world bourgeoisie. These efforts were roundly repudiated by the overwhelming majority of the ALP membership in the last few days.

All efforts were bent to break the united front in such locals where Communist and Socialist workers were collaborating harmoniously. Honest Socialist workers and leaders who refused to go along with the disruptive policy were terrorized, blackjacked into breaking the united front. Under the direct leadership of Dubinsky, all cliques and grouplets were united into an unprincipled so-called anti-Communist Front worthy of Hitler and Mussolini. The Lovestonites, Trotzkyites and

Socialists who profess opposition to the war, joined under the banner of the Social-Democratic warmongers to defeat the Communists.

Significant in the outcome of the elections were the results in Locals 9, 22 and 117, where all the right-wing forces were concentrated against the left wing.

The combined membership of these three locals number about 41,500, of which 26,274 participated in the elections. Of these, the highest vote for the right wing candidates that had no opposition candidates running against them was 14,296. The vote for the left-wing candidates was 9,593. This means that the vote of the left-wing candidates in the three locals was 36 per cent of the number of votes cast and 40.2 per cent in comparison with the highest vote received by the right-wing candidates.

THE RED-BAITERS UNITE

The left-wing candidates polled a high vote even in these locals which are considered to be the stronghold of the administration forces. Of special interest are the figures in Local 22, where a small independent group polled 2,000 and a partial slate of a small unemployed group polled close to 1,000 and the rank and file left-wing group polled 5,600 votes, thus showing a combined vote of 9,000 against Zimmerman's vote of 10,000 out of the 18,000 votes cast and about 9,000 for the rest of the administration slate.

In this atmosphere, the elections of delegates to the 1940 Convention and to local administrations took place. On the one hand, all cliques—Socialists, Forwardists, Lovestonites, Trotzky-

ites, Anarchists, Poale-Zionists—were united around a program of red-baiting, war-mongering, slander, ignoring all the most vital problems of the industry. On the other hand were the progressive rank-and-file forces, coming with a constructive trade union program, advocating internal democracy, reaffiliation to the CIO, opposition to war. This was, indeed, a real contest between progress and reaction, with many serious advantages on the part of reaction, namely, full control of the union apparatus, unlimited finances, support of the entire capitalist press.

Most significant is the election in Local 89. For many years, this local, led by the arch-bureaucrat Antonini, who spits venom at the "undemocratic" Bolsheviks, never bothered to have a real election. On a number of occasions, they simply decided to perpetuate the existing leadership for another two-year term.

When for the sake of form, some kind of election did take place, few workers dared risk their jobs and run in opposition to the Antonini machine. The left-wing progressive group was poorly organized, was not represented on the election committee, and had no possibility to check the tabulation of the votes. Therefore it is a real sign of progress when of 23,000 supposedly voting (a figure which is open to serious doubt) the machine was compelled to concede 2,300 votes to progressive candidates labeled Communist, and 6,700 to independent opposition candidates.

These figures of the Local 89 election are of the greatest significance. They indicate a real awakening in the ranks of the

Italian garment workers who are breaking away from their bureaucratic leadership and their false issues of pitting Italian against Jewish workers. They are taking their place side by side with the other progressive workers in the industry. These 9,000 votes added to 18,000 votes in the other locals, represent an anti-administration vote of 27,000 in New York City alone. It is true none of these groups put up a full slate, but the vote nonetheless shows that all is not so well with the present leadership.

There were left-wing victories in the elections in a number of important centers. In Los Angeles, the renegade Wisnpak, who was sent to make a job on the cloak and dressmakers, was roundly defeated; under similar conditions, Boston and other centers still unreported; the election of the outstanding leader of the cloak workers in New York, Boruchowitch, in Local 117; the election of four progressive executive board members and one business agent in Local 22, and the election of a delegate in Local 9; the low votes and in some instances defeat of the most vicious red-baiters; the high vote polled—despite all provocations—by the left-wing defeated candidates, some of whom were defeated by 15 to 60 votes. The result of the elections, taking into account all circumstances, stamp as lie the capitalist press headlines about the liquidation of the Communists in the ILGWU. They show that these attacks and slanders are smokescreens to cover up the bankruptcy of the Dubinsky leadership, its unwillingness to

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meet the issues affecting the lives and well-being of the mass of the membership.

What are the main problems of the garment workers that the militant delegate must bring before the Convention? In the center of all discussion is the problem of jobs, working standards and conditions.

DUBINSKY "ANSWERS"

At the recent installation meeting in Local 9, President Dubinsky attempted to answer some of the most burning problems, but his answer was neither correct nor satisfactory. In speaking of the present conditions in the cloak industry, Dubinsky stated that the trouble with the industry is that there is not enough capital investment such as exists in the basic industries, hence the garment workers have no real capitalists to fight. Therefore increased wages, shorter hours, do not basically improve the general conditions of the workers, since employment is on the increase. By implication this meant that the workers in New York must enter into competition with the out-of-town workers by reducing their hard-won standard and thus indirectly forcing the workers in the smaller centers to work for lower wages than prevail today. For the New York workers, it means giving up their advanced position and allowing their conditions to deteriorate to the status of the out-of-town shop.

This analysis of the industry and the problems of the garment workers is incorrect as it is dangerous. It is analogous to the position of those who would condemn the small storekeeper who can barely meet his rent or provide the most elementary needs for his family for the increase in prices of food or other commodities instead of directing this fight against the huge monopolies who coin billions at the expense of the masses.

It is true that there are many bankruptcies in the garment industry, that many of the contractors and small manufacturers are not to be classed among the 60 families, but these are not really the employers but the foremen of the chain store millionaires in the industry, the chain stores, the J. C. Penny's, Montgomery Wards, Sears Roebuck, Chicago Mall Order Houses, etc., who coin millions in the clothing industry, who exploit the workers and small employers alike. For the year 1939, J. C. Penny reports a net profit of \$16,400,000, 2-3/4 million dollars more than for the year 1938. The first effort to organize the chain stores, made by the Cloak Joint Board, showed that the clothing magnates, just as the auto magnates, can be forced to pay decent standards to the workers in the industry.

The out-of-town problem will be solved not by placing the New

York workers in competition with the out-of-town workers. It can and will be solved by more intensive efforts to organize and consolidate the union in the out-of-town shops, by encouraging and bringing forward into leadership the thousands of new workers who came into the union, instead of continuing the present policy where a few bureaucrats from New York, who have no understanding of, no confidence in, and no sympathy for these new sections of the workers, to rule over them in the most bureaucratic fashion.

Compare the progress of the ILGWU in developing new cadres of leadership since the influx of the mass of the new membership came into the union in the out-of-town shops with the out-of-town locals in the Electrical and Radio Workers' Union, a much smaller organization with much smaller means; or with the transport union, the wholesale and warehouse workers' union, the communications union—and you will see on the one hand a growing union with a growing youth leadership, while in the International every attempt of new workers to come forward into leadership is discouraged, and, if the worker is persistent, it may even mean

elimination from the industry, as was the case in Bridgeport, Conn., and in many other centers.

Another problem closely connected with the above, is the question of the attitude toward the CIO.

An indicated above, the progress of the ILGWU came simultaneously, and was closely bound up with the progress and growth of the CIO, just as its backward steps came since its break with the CIO and its flirtations with the A. F. of L.

LEWIS' STAND

In his clarion call to the people to fight the war-mongers who would drag us into the imperialist war in behalf of the British Empire, John L. Lewis, the spokesman and leader of the CIO, voiced not only the thoughts and feelings of the CIO membership, but also those of the ILGWU members, many of whom were in the World War and under the direction of the union leadership sold Liberty Bonds, only to be disillusioned as were millions of other Americans. Lewis' call to the American people to enlist in the war at home, the war against poverty, unemployment, ill-health, for peace and a decent American standard of living, struck a re-

sponsive chord among the thousands of cloakmakers, dressmakers, who for months walk the streets looking for a job which cannot be found.

Lewis' speech to the young people at the Youth Congress met with the most enthusiastic response from the young people in the needle trades. His militant fight for the rights of the Negro people evoked great hopes among the Negro people, who even today in the needle industry are limited to the minority craft and barred from the more skilled crafts such as cutters and operators.

His call to the workers, the common people of America, not to remain dependent, to cut their ties with the old parties who betrayed the confidence of labor and to join hands in the building of a third party is certainly in harmony with the strivings of the garment workers, many of whom are members of the ALP.

Most of the unorganized sections of the ILGWU are located in the smaller centers, where the CIO has built up organization—the steel and mining towns, etc. The wives and daughters of these workers constitute the majority of workers in the needle trade shops who can best be organized

with the assistance of the existing unions.

JOINS WARMAKERS

There is yet another problem—the South which is growing in importance as a garment center.

Then there is the question uppermost in the minds of all workers, the question of keeping our country out of the war and exerting our influence to make an end to the war in Europe.

The leadership of the ILGWU, following the line of Social Democracy the world over, has joined hands with the Chamberlains and Reynauds, the Mannerheims and the Roosevelts, in the holy war to "save civilization." They have especially distinguished themselves in their service to the bourgeoisie in their venomous attacks against the Soviet Union, the land of Socialism. The glowing reports coming to the garment workers whose relatives reside in the territory taken over by the Soviet Union has exposed the libelous slanders of the leadership against the Soviet Union. This was evidenced by the refusal of the same leadership which made the greatest sacrifices in behalf of Spanish democracy to be taken in by the Hoover drive to raise money for Mannerheim. Despite

the attempt of Dubinsky to place the campaign for Spain and Mannerheim on the same plane of aid to the victims of aggression as he did at the Local 9 Installation Meeting, the members, in refusing to contribute to the Hoover campaign, have demonstrated that they consider the help for Mannerheim a betrayal of the cause for which Spain fought so valiantly.

These are some of the main problems facing the membership at the ILGWU Convention. These are the problems raised in the election program of the rank and file, which the minority delegation—the old and tried veterans as well as some of the new militants—will undoubtedly place and discuss at the Convention.

Though small in number, the delegation which polled 35 per cent of the vote in the recent elections has a mandate which will express the interests of the entire membership.

Now a few words about some of the problems facing the rank and file workers in their day-to-day work in the Union after the elections. The rank and file group of Local 22 must be commended for the promptness with which it challenged Zimmerman, replying to his call for war against the

rank and file printed in the entire metropolitan press. The answer to the call for war was a call for unity to build and fortify the union to meet the unsolved problems. This answer met with response from all workers irrespective of the slate they supported in the election. The best proof of this was the turn-about-face. Zimmerman was forced to beat a retreat and print a special leaflet repudiating his former statement which had evoked general resentment.

I am quite sure that the rank and file forces will not follow the advice of some individuals, who, to spite Zimmerman, would adopt an attitude sometimes expressed along the following lines: Since the other side has the leadership, let them do the work. Such an attitude is false and means abandonment of the struggle.

THE LEFT WING'S TASKS

The left wing forces will now work with even greater energy to help maintain union conditions in the shops; to help activate the workers, to think hard and seriously about the problems of the union; to actively participate in the work in shops, building organizational and educational activities at membership meetings. We have to fight for it in the union as we do in the general political life of our country. Participation in all activities will give the left wing an opportunity to initiate policies and tactics in the best interests of the union as well as bring forward general political issues in the interest of the whole working class. Activation of the workers in the left wing can serve as pressure even on the present leadership.

Another problem for the left wing is to improve upon the beginnings that have been made to come closer, give more attention to the problem of the young workers in the minority crafts, the Negro workers, Spanish workers and especially the Italian workers who constitute a large percentage of the membership.

The splendid beginnings made in breaking down the dictatorship in Local 89 is very encouraging. The vote of 2,300 for the rank and file candidates and close to 7,600 votes for the independent didates signifies the awakening of the Italian workers.

Another problem is to establish real unity in the ranks of the workers in the fight around all the burning issues of common concern to all workers irrespective of their political development. The sharp division in the last election does not represent a real division in the ranks of the workers and must not be allowed to continue.

With the exception of the small groups organizationally connected with the various renegade groups and the Forward, the mass of the workers in the "Progressive Group," etc., in the shops are interested in a stronger union and

better working conditions, as are the followers of the rank and file groups.

THE COMMUNISTS' ROLE

Now, as to the role of the Communists in the ILGWU. Far from being liquidated, they constitute one of the important sections of our Party in which we take great pride. They weathered the storm of the past few months like real veterans in the revolutionary movement, regardless of the fact that a large number are newcomers in our ranks. The Gerjoys and Lipniaks, etc., who were long suspected of secretly working with Zimmerman and the Lovestones group, showed their real colors as cowards and jobholders when the crisis came.

However, the hopes entertained by Zimmerman and these renegades that their desertion would disrupt our Party membership proved a dismal failure so that they could not even keep up the pretense of being an independent group and were compelled to openly join the Lovestone group to hide their bankruptcy. They did not make a single dent in our Party. On the contrary, their expulsions eliminated the discordant note in the ranks of our Party. It helped to solidify our membership around the policies of our Party which in the first place fights in the front ranks of the class struggle as loyal, disciplined members of the working class.

The results of the election show thousands of workers in the Union have shown a real understanding of the role and the policies of our Party in the immediate struggle and in the struggle for Socialism.

The garment workers who represent an important section of the American working class are thinking seriously about the fundamental problem in the present world situation. The example of the glorious Soviet Union and its accomplishments of the past ten years, which they follow closely and in whose victories they rejoice, in contrast to the ten years' unemployment crisis and war in the capitalist world, has brought hundreds of them closer to our Party. Their loyal support for the Soviet Union and our Party morally and financially shows that we have among these workers a most fertile field for building our Party and its press, the "Daily," the Freiheit, the Communist, etc.

The task of our comrades at the present time is to launch a well-organized and planned campaign to build the Party as they deal with their union problems.

The best answer our comrades can give to the boastful statements of Dubinsky, Zimmerman, about the liquidation of the Communists is to fulfill their quota of 15 per cent increase in Party membership, increased circulation of the Daily Worker and Freiheit by the time of the Party Convention in May.

Some Facts That Mr. Dubinsky Would Like to Forget

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cline in the total vote shows that the Nagler administration is losing support among the membership.

And so David tries to cover up with the help of the capitalist press. He speaks of how many were actually elected. He does not dare speak of the total vote received by the left wing forces. To do so would be very embarrassing indeed. But he can't fool the membership of the ILGWU and he will not fool the labor movement as a whole. He will not even succeed in fooling his pals—Hearst and Hoover.

The influence of the left wing forces at the coming convention of the ILGWU will be greater than at any of the previous conventions in recent years despite the fact that only a small number of Communists and other left wing delegates will be present. The votes registered against the Administration will be an influence that can not be easily overlooked. This time the left wing will be an independent force not tied to the administration. This will be so especially if the group of left wing delegates that has been elected to the ILGWU convention will boldly bring forward their program as they presented it to the membership in the local elections and if this program will be reinforced by resolutions

and telegrams to the convention by locals and shops.

The left wing has the task at the convention and within the union generally to press for a solution of the accumulated economic problems, the failure of the employers to live up to the agreements, the failure of the union to enforce the agreements at all times, the whittling down of wages and conditions through price changes, etc. It has the task of taking up in earnest the problem of the cheaper lines, the out of town shops, the organization of the unorganized, the increasing unemployment from which the ILGWU membership is suffering.

The left wing must boldly challenge Dubinsky's support of the Roosevelt hunger and war program as expressed in the Roosevelt budget and in the Roosevelt steps designed to drag this country into the imperialist slaughter. This policy of the ILGWU leadership has resulted in a failure of this large and influential organization to do anything to stop the reactionary trend in Congress.

In its attacks on the unemployed and the Wagner Law, in its curtailment of Civil Liberties, its failure to pass the Anti-lynching Bill and numerous other issues of vital concern to the ILGWU membership and to labor as a whole. In general, the CIO legislative program and its opposition to America's imperialist role in the war furnishes a sound and effective platform for the left

wing, a platform which expresses the desires of the majority of the ILGWU membership. The left wing must also fight for a break with Roosevelt and against any third term and for the ILGWU to join with the CIO and other labor and progressive forces for independent labor political action in the 1940 elections.

The left wing has the task of exposing the role of Dubinsky in breaking away from the CIO and his attempts to drag the ILGWU back into the A. F. of L., not in order to fight for unity of the labor movement but in order to strengthen the Woils and Hutchsons against the CIO, against militant trade unionism, for the Roosevelt hunger and war policies and against trade union unity.

The left wing should insist that the convention submit the question of the future affiliation of the ILGWU to a democratic referendum of the entire membership after a thorough discussion.

The left wing should also insist on the democratization of the ILGWU, an end to the dictatorial rule over the newly organized workers outside the big cities by Dubinsky appointees. The union should allow for the greatest development of initiative and democracy on the part of the membership and from top to bottom elect a leadership fully representative of all sections of the union doing away once and for all with the theory of the dictatorship of Dubinsky's

who constitute a majority of the union, are hardly represented in the GEB and among the paid officials. Negro workers, who constitute a large section of the membership are far from being adequately represented in the leadership. The policy of the union should be such as will unite all nationalities by having them fully represented in the leadership.

As for the left wing itself, while it can be proud of the showing made in the elections it must not overlook its own weaknesses, many of which reflect the general weaknesses of the ILGWU and which also affect and influence the left wing. This is especially true with regard to attention to the out-of-town and relatively newly organized workers, and with regard to attention to the various national groups and the women, youth and Negro membership.

The left wing must also learn to take up and press for a solution of the economic problems all year round. It must learn to be on guard in the enforcement of the agreements, and set an example by its own conduct in the shops to all workers. It must also overcome its timidity in raising the general issues such as the struggle against war, the role of the Soviet Union, the fight for labor and social legislation. Too often the left wing does not

actionary policies on these issues in the name of the membership. A case in point is the role of the ILGWU leadership in the American Labor Party.

In general the left wing should follow a bolder and more independent policy. This means, of course, neither to run ahead of the workers nor lag behind them. It means to rouse and activate the masses around the left wing program and the development of an all-year struggle around this program. Undoubtedly weaknesses in the past in this respect led in many of the locals to a failure to secure a majority of the votes. Unquestionably the fact that the left wing slates in most cases did not hold forth the prospect that the left wing could win the local administration (failure to nominate the head of the ticket) influenced many workers to vote for the administration slate since they felt that in any case the present administration would remain in power.

As for the Communists in the ILGWU, they have a special task, in addition to being the best builders of the union, the most active leaders in the struggles of the workers and the most consistent champions of the left wing program. This special task is to strengthen their independent role and to increase the number of Communists. In this way they will be in a better position to help build and strengthen the union and mass it for a militant workingclass policy.