

# The N. Y. State AFL and Political Action

By Rose Wortis

The Hotel and Club Employees Union, Local 6, performed an important service to the labor movement and the people of the whole State when it recently posed sharply the question of labor's future political tactics.

Discussing the recent elections in which major candidates endorsed by the State Federation of Labor went down to defeat, the Hotel local's newspaper asked editorially on Nov. 14:

"Is this method (non-partisan endorsement of candidates) the only way for the State Federation of Labor to express itself politically to protect the gains already made by labor in the field of labor legislation?"

This and other related questions, the editorial went on, "deserve the serious consideration of the membership and particularly the leadership" of the AFL.

## WORTH PONDERING

Yes, indeed, these are questions worth pondering over, since they involve the well-being not only of the hundreds of thousands of AFL members and their families but the entire labor and progressive movement of our state and nation.

The organized labor movement in New York numbers about a million and a half. With their families it represents a voting strength of 4,000,000. The labor movement has close ties and great influence amongst other sections of progressives and pro-labor forces in the state.

Under such circumstances one should expect labor to have a real voice in the affairs of the state and city government, not only indirectly through its support of other government forces but through its own spokesman coming from the ranks of labor having responsibility to the 4,000,000 constituents who elected them.

In many states where the strength and influence of the organized labor movement can in no way compare to that of New York, labor's voice is heard directly in the councils of government, whereas in our state, some politicians act as through labor, especially the AFL is in their vest pocket.

What explains the deplorable situation which in the last election led to ignominious defeat and threatens the gains achieved through years of struggle not only for the members of the AFL but the CIO as well?

## KEY REASONS

They can be summarized as follows:

1. Failure on the part of the AFL to recognize the power of its organized strength.
2. The old outworn "non-partisan" policy which makes labor a tail to other parties.
3. Diversion in the ranks of labor.

In criticizing and rejecting this

so-called non-partisan policy, there is no intent on my part to reject the policy of collaboration between labor and other forces, supporting candidates of other parties, a policy which is particularly applicable to the present political situation when political parties are in a state of flux, when party labels are losing their meaning, when both Hoover and Wendell Willkie are presumably spokesmen for the Republican Party, when President Roosevelt and Martin Dies both speak as Democrats.

What is wrong with the policies of the State Federation is not collaboration with other groups, but failure to organize its own strength as a basis for collaboration with others on terms of equality. To succeed it must be an independent force that has a voice in determining the program, policies and candidates that are to carry forward the agreed upon program. Such is the policy of Labor's Non-Partisan League in such states where it exists. Such is the policy of the American Labor Party in our state.

## DEWEY—THE RESULT

Such methods of collaboration have nothing in common with the policies of the AFL leaders in the last elections when a clique of Democratic politicians under the leadership of Jim Farley, without consulting labor, and over the expressed opposition not only of the CIO but large sections of the AFL (demonstration for Mead at the State Convention, opposition to Bennett at the Central Trades) forced the nomination of Farley's man Friday, John J. Bennett. This led the Democratic Party to defeat and interrupted a record of many years of progressive government in our state, confronting the labor movement with a Republican State legislature and Governor. (It is to be hoped that with labor and progressive forces on the job even the Republican Administration will not dare to embark on a morale-weakening program of wrecking labor legislation).

When the ALP was organized in 1936 it appeared for a time that labor had finally come into its own. George Meany, at the time president of the State Federation of Labor, participated in some of the deliberations that led to the formation of the ALP and for a time indicated friendliness towards it. Hopes were high. For a time it looked as though at long last labor had recognized its own power and the most effective way of using that power in the interests of its own members and the millions of New York citizens.

But the jubilation was short-lived. The corrupt politicians and the Joe Ryans and their friends who traffic with Tammany Hall, and use the State Federation to advance their own bargaining power with the Tammany Hall, brought tremendous pressure to bear within the AFL against the ALP. The policies of the Social-Democratic leaders in the ALP against the left-progressive forces,

which led to the ALP internal conflict, were exploited by the AFL politicians to discredit the ALP and advance their so-called non-partisan policies as most "practicable."

## GENERAL AGREEMENT

Despite its failure to go along with the ALP, which would have made the ALP not only a balance-of-power party, but a major party in the state, the State Federation, until the last elections, found itself in agreement with the ALP, the CIO and left-progressive unions at least as far as major candidates were concerned. The Democratic Party under the progressive leadership of Gov. Lehman was the force that helped to unify the labor movement, if not through joint at least through parallel actions on the political field.

During the last election when the State Federation leadership publicly attacked the ALP and tacitly gave its support to the Farley machine, the whole bankruptcy of its policy was exposed.

However, the conditions exist for turning this defeat into a victory.

Despite the AFL endorsement of Bennett he was repudiated by the voters, amongst them thousands of AFL workers. The outstanding feature of the election, as the Hotel Journal states correctly, "was the large vote polled by the ALP (which had the support of the city and state CIO) a vote of 410,000 or about 10 per cent of the total vote. This is the first state-wide campaign in which the ALP stood alone with its own gubernatorial candidate against two major parties." True, the ALP is the only party in the state which maintained its voting strength despite the large fall in registration. It is a party that has firmly established itself as a decisive political force in the state, a party that will have to be seriously reckoned with.

## WARNING TO DEWEY

The large vote of the ALP will be a warning to the Dewey administration not to scuttle the legislation won by labor during the past period, especially if the ALP on the basis of its new strength will assume greater responsibility in uniting AFL and CIO as well as the pro-Roosevelt and pro-Willkie forces in the Democratic and Republican Parties, the farming population upstate, around a common legislative program based on the needs of the war—a program that will translate into state legislation the progressive policies of the national administration and make them more effective weapons in mobilizing the 14 million New York people for victory.

The recent state AFL legislative conference and the tentative program of the CIO lay the basis for such unity around such issues as rationing, man-power, rent-control, housing, and the fight against discrimination.

Such joint action around immediate issues will help to heal the split and lay the basis for more effective unity for making the ALP

the true expression of the millions of organized workers and their allies.

## REAL CHALLENGE

To the progressive forces in the AFL the present situation presents a real challenge. They must emerge from their isolation from the mass of the AFL members, place the issues squarely before the membership as well as the leadership, help draw the lessons of the recent defeat and help to develop a broader political perspective for the AFL in our state.

The experience of the past period in connection with the movement for labor unity, international labor unity, the second front, the state convention, show that despite hesitation and mistakes, the struggle in which our nation is engaged at present is advancing the thought and actions even of the more conservative sections of the labor movement. The necessities of the war are helping to break down many old policies and practices. It is teaching everybody to face realities more boldly and with greater foresight.

To advance such possibilities it will be necessary for the ALP leadership itself to correct some of its wrong policies which only narrowed down the movement and alienated important sections of the labor and progressive movement.

The left-progressive forces have proven their loyalty to the ALP (if such proof were needed) and their consistently principled position when, despite their elimination from any voice in the state ALP leadership, they conducted an active energetic campaign for the ALP candidates.

Through the efforts of these forces the City CIO, the State CIO, and all its affiliated unions especially in the city, endorsed and actively campaigned for Dean Alfange, ALP gubernatorial candidate, and helped to pile up his large vote.

If the ALP is to become the real expression of labor and progress its leadership must be representative of these forces, a leadership that will include AFL and CIO, right and left—all those ready to work for its program to win the war and guarantee the peace.

## Worth Repeating Fight Way to Peace Table

"The news from Russia is almost unbelievably good," says a New Orleans States editorial of Nov. 26, under the title of "Bear Growls." We quote, in part:

Among the many enigmatic problems of this war, none approaches in the depth of its mystery to practically all observers the staying power of the Soviet Russians. Time and again Hitler has lowered his gun for the mercy shot, or in fact has announced that it had been delivered, and the fighting Russians have broken out anew to add new laurels to Adolf's reputation as a damlier. . . .

Their ability to fight on and on in defeat and retreat is an inspiration to the whole democratic world. But that inspiration should be tempered with the realization that we must do likewise. We must fight our way to the defeat of Germany and to a seat at the peace table as senior partners, not junior partners to Russia, and, when we do, much of the present doubt and misgiving probably will disappear.

## Quick, Dr. Henry, the Flit!

From Lieutenant Commander R. C. Pendleton of the Naval Medical Corps comes a report of a new treatment for burns, used successfully on 97 sailors severely burned at Pearl Harbor.

The treatment consists of spraying a wax film with a flit gun on the burned tissue. The wax film is worked off with warm water and changed daily. Pain is eliminated, it is said, because the wax film protects nerve tips from cold and air.