

CRUCIAL ISSUES FACING THE I. L. G. W. U.

By ROSE WORTIS

Considerable public interest was aroused by the recent elections held in New York by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union.

This interest was only partially due to the fact that this union is the fifth largest in the A. F. of L., with a membership close to 400,000, about 182,000 of whom are in New York State where they consist mainly of workers of Italian, Jewish, Negro, Spanish, and Puerto Rican extraction.

The interest was mainly due to the fact that the I.L.G.W.U. exerts an influence in the labor movement far beyond its numerical strength. For years it has been a battleground between the Left-progressive forces, on the one hand, and, on the other, the diehard reactionary, Social-Democratic group led by David Dubinsky, the *New Leader*, and the Jewish *Forward* group, supported by their collaborators in the A. F. of L. Executive Council—Matthew Woll, George Meaney, etc.

THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

In this union, the membership finds itself under a considerable handicap in having its voice heard

both before and during election campaigns. To secure themselves against effective criticism, David Dubinsky, the union's president, and his supporters had amended the union's constitution to outlaw any organized expression of opposition to their policies. These bars are lifted only three months before union elections, which take place every three years!

The pre-election period in the I.L.G.W.U., therefore, is one of heated discussion among the workers on the basic problems affecting their union, its relations with the employers, and its role in the labor and progressive political movement.

The contending forces in the recent election were the powerfully entrenched Dubinsky machine, supported by unlimited finances, and the rank and file groups organized shortly before the elections. These groups, among whom are the Communists, consisted of rank and file workers in disagreement with the policies and the leadership now dominant in the union. In some locals, such as Local 117 (Cloak Operators), the group included outstanding Right-wingers who are in disagreement with some of Dubinsky's policies. These former administration supporters believe with the progressives, that the union leadership should include all constructive elements, irrespective of political views, and not continue as the monopoly only of those who accept the policies and dictates of Dubinsky.

The rank-and-file groups ran partial slates, and only in 14 of the most important locals. The official tally

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shows that they received 17,181 votes in these locals, against the administration vote of some 77,000.

The central issue advanced by the rank and file forces was the need for the unity of all workers to preserve and advance labor's gains in the face of the offensive of the open-shoppers, and for a basic change in the union's present reactionary course on foreign policy. To realize such a program, the rank and file proposed a united leadership to consist of able workers, regardless of political views. They put up partial slates and repudiated the unfounded charge that they were seeking control or a majority of the posts to be filled.

Dubinsky and Co. made "Communism" the issue. Their election material rivaled the wildest tirades of the Rankins, Thomases, and Hearsts. They charged that the progressives were working under direct orders from Moscow to capture control of the union and to use it to advance the ambitions of "a certain country to get bases in the Dardenelles, in Spitsbergen, a large part of Korea, a part of the South Pole, a free hand in Europe and a voice in the affairs of America." (Declaration of the administration group of Local 117.)

Another favorite argument advanced by the administration forces was that the Left-wing, if it won the election, would not be allowed to take office, that Dubinsky would carry through another mass expulsion that would result in a repetition

of the internal division and strife of 1925-33. This argument carried much weight, especially among old-timers who know how unscrupulous Dubinsky is.

On trade issues the administration modestly took full credit for wartime prosperity in the industry! It presented no program to meet the problems of the industry, no perspectives. The only extent to which it dealt with industrial problems was to incorporate demagogically in its program the main economic planks advanced by the rank and file groups, striving to prove thereby that on trade union issues there were no real differences. Its bankruptcy was laid bare in an editorial in *Justice* dealing with the industrial situation, which had only this to say: "We must keep our fingers crossed."

Throughout the election campaign, the leadership carefully concealed its reactionary policies in relation to the labor movement as a whole, and spoke piously of world peace.

Dubinsky attached much importance to these elections, especially in New York City, the main center of the industry.

His central objective was to exploit the present anti-Red hysteria to wipe out or at least greatly reduce the Left-wing vote. To him the possibilities seemed very promising. To begin with, the I.L.G.W.U. had experienced a period of prosperity during the last few years. The earnings of the workers, especially with the

long hours of overtime, were comparatively high. Because of the backlog of consumers' purchasing power, employment during 1946 was at its highest peak. Furthermore, the many basic unsolved problems in the industry—the organization of the chain stores and mail order houses, overlapping of work between the I.L.G.W.U. and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, wage differentials between New York and out of town, etc.—had been deliberately pushed to the background during the war by the union leadership.

Dubinsky therefore took personal supervision of the election campaign. He brought into line some of the dissatisfied Right-wingers aspiring for office. All Right-wing groups were united in a holy crusade against the "Communists."

Here was one more chance for Dubinsky to emerge as the champion Red-baiter, to show the world how to deal with the "Red menace." The entire staff of the local unions, the Joint Boards, and the National Office were mobilized for the job. The machinery of the union, including the mailing lists from the National Office, was placed at the disposal of the administration groups in violation of the union constitution. The demands of the rank and file that the election be supervised by the Honest Ballot Association, that voting machines be installed, and that there be no interference by the administration and no use of union machinery for partisan purposes,

were rejected by the General Executive Board.

Every trick in the book was used to thwart the will of the membership, as the post-election statement issued by some of the leading rank and file candidates makes clear.

For example, Dubinsky devised an ingenious method to prevent the election of leadership representing various groupings: he instituted a system of bloc voting instead of balloting for individual candidates on the basis of merit.

In a number of locals (such as Local 48, Italian Cloak Operators), the ballots were not numbered or counted before the voting started. There was no system of identifying voters, thus opening the way for repeaters (Local 22, Dressmakers). In Local 20 (Raincoat Makers), voting was carried on in the shops for a period of three days, although the constitution provides for a one-day election. In Local 35 (Cloak Pressers), business agents took the ballots from hundreds of workers and voted for them.

The job of piling up a large vote was done so thoroughly that some locals counted more ballots than they have members, based on the number of delegates allowed each local for the national convention. Locals such as 48 and 89 (Italian Dressmakers), whose membership meetings are attended by only a handful of members, recorded 23,000 and 13,000 votes respectively, cast for the administration slate.

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nounced to the New York press that in 29 New York locals the Left-wing had received 14,700 votes, against 104,000 for the administration.

Rank and file leaders pointed out, however, that the total of 104,000 votes is misleading. It is closer to the total of the eligible voters than actual votes cast since the rank and file contested the election in only 14 locals (the other 15 had practically no elections). In these 14 locals, where the administration received 77,000 votes, the rank and file actually received 17,181 votes, virtually the same as in 1944 despite the influence of the intervening period of prosperity.

Dubinsky is disturbed. He juggles figures and percentages and tries to minimize the rank and file vote because it belies his boast that he has purged the union of Communists. He knows that these votes represent the most advanced and union-conscious workers in the industry who stuck to their guns in the face of endless difficulties. He also knows that thousands of those who voted for the administration do not support his anti-working-class policies but were pressured into voting for the administration by the business agents who control their jobs and who did their utmost to befog the issues in the campaign.

No matter how Dubinsky manipulates the figures, the plain truth, revealed by his own statement, is that thousands of workers, who consistently support the rank and file pro-

gressive forces, are not represented and have no voice in the union's leadership.

The election revealed a sharp cleavage between a large section of the membership and the Dubinsky leadership and an urgent desire for a united leadership that would include workers of all political opinions. It also showed that the temporary prosperity of the war years and the ruthless persecution and suspension of progressives have not undermined the solid Left-wing strength in the union. It demonstrated that no real unity can exist so long as thousands of workers are systematically barred from participating in the life and leadership of their union.

The election results also explode the flimsy charges of the Riesels, the Woltmans, and Stewart Alsop (*Saturday Evening Post*) that progressives in C.I.O. and A. F. of L. unions retain their leadership through mechanical control of the union machinery.

Here is a union under tight control of the most unscrupulous Red-baiters, with a powerful machine and 1,200 officers in New York alone, and yet the rank and file, given half a chance, voted in the thousands, even at the risk of their jobs, for the Left-wing and the Communists.

URGENT ISSUES

Though the elections are over, the issues raised in the campaign are more urgent than ever. No. 1 is the defeat of the anti-labor drive. The

Hartley slave-labor Bill, the witch-hunt against Federal employees, and the proposed legislation to outlaw the Communist Party are all of one pattern. The aim of all these attacks is to disrupt the labor movement from within and undermine the democratic people's movement at home in order to eliminate the main forces which challenge the policies of American imperialism abroad.

The labor movement has been slow to grasp the full significance of this anti-labor drive. Some people thought that, with an eye on 1948, the Republican reactionaries would move cautiously. The court decision in the miners' case and the introduction of the Hartley Bill have helped to dispel these illusions. Even the most conservative labor leaders recognize now that there is a well-planned drive by the N.A.M. to restore the open shop, company unionism, and government by injunction, a drive to wipe out all that labor achieved during Roosevelt's administration.

Labor—primarily the C.I.O. and progressive A. F. of L. unions—is fighting back. But not the I.L.G.W.U. leadership! Dubinsky broke the solid labor front in his testimony before the Senate committee hearings on the anti-labor bills, and won acclaim from reactionary members of the committee and from the press. He proved himself a "labor leader amenable to reason," agreeing to modifications of the Wagner Act and to restoration of

"free speech" to the employers. To the average worker, this means giving the boss a free hand to intimidate him.

Dubinsky is, deservedly, one of the favorite labor leaders of the reactionary forces in the country, widely advertised as a labor "statesman" who believes that strikes are antiquated and that when workers ask for more wages they should be "sold" instead on more production.

Dubinsky and his colleagues can fight when they want to, but they never want to fight anyone except the progressives in their union and in the labor movement. The local installation meetings held at the height of the anti-labor hysteria were turned into Dubinsky editions of the star-chamber proceedings of the Un-American Committee. He spent hours villifying the thousands who had had the courage to vote against his hand-picked candidates and instructed the newly-elected officers to wage an unrelenting war of extermination against the "Communists!"

AN INFAMOUS ROLE

Dubinsky's war against his own membership and against the progressive labor movement is consistent with and flows out of his general political line on all major questions of domestic and foreign policy.

In the present world situation, he and his colleagues are just as alarmed as the capitalist class itself at the leftward trend of the masses throughout the world, and throw their support

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to reaction wherever it is in danger. Their role today, much like that of the Social-Democrats in Germany after World War I, is to promote bourgeois ideology in the labor movement and to win working-class support for American imperialism.

They have become crusaders for the preservation of "free enterprise" against "Communist totalitarianism." They glorify the capitalist system. A typical example of this is contained in an article in the *Jewish Forward* of December 10, 1946, by the theoretician of this group, Rafael Abramovitch. He tries to prove that the Marxist position on the state as an organ of class rule is antiquated and does not apply to the U.S., where the government is "an intermediary" between classes. During the miners' strike, when the N.A.M. inaugurated its anti-union campaign under the slogan that unions are monopolies, Abramovitch wrote:

Parallel to the system of capitalist monopolists, there arose in America a system of labor monopolists in the form of unions . . . intention to destroy each other. . . . Both sides strive to get along with each other—only in a democracy can there be such a "partnership" between capital and labor.

Therefore, both classes are interested in democratic forms and in the mechanics of political democracy.

The Government, thereby, is not the servant of the capitalist class but the arbitrator between two powerful social-economic organizations.

The importance of this labor and

liberal base for the monopolist scheme is highlighted by the Americans for Democratic Action, in which Social-Democratic influence is considerable.

When the country began to realize and protest the implications of the Truman Doctrine and its threat to the U.N., the A.D.A. hastened to support Truman in a demagogic statement aimed to make this reactionary program more palatable to the progressive forces.

Support of such a reactionary foreign policy leads logically to the subordination of all domestic issues to this "higher purpose." Hence, in the eyes of Dubinsky and his colleagues, the C.I.O. wage movement becomes a plot to disorganize the national economy in the interests of the Soviet Union. The witch-hunt against government employees is only a means of safeguarding our government against Russian spies. Strikes for improved conditions are translated into inflationary actions aimed to disrupt unity between labor and management. Economy at the expense of social agencies is a necessity to assure funds for military preparations. Labor curbs are merely the means of adjusting differences between labor and management; speed-up (expanded production) is just a pre-condition for increased purchasing power; while elimination of O.P.A. is a means of stimulating production and lowering prices.

However, it is not only ideologically that Dubinsky and his cohorts

serve reaction. They implement their ideology with dollars collected from the workers, ostensibly for relief and other humanitarian causes. They have worked out an interventionist policy of their own, paralleling that of the Truman administration. They, too, send emissaries to Europe, Asia, and Latin America to disrupt the labor movement, and to prop up discredited anti-unity Social-Democratic forces and even profascist elements fighting democratic governments.

Only a few weeks ago, Dubinsky loaned \$100,000 to the Dutch Transport Workers. Why only the Dutch Transport Workers? Because, he said, they actively opposed the World Federation of Trade Unions. Thus Dubinsky proved himself an apt pupil of Herbert Hoover. Relief—yes—but only to those who support his anti-unity policies.

Funds collected for relief also are used to support disruptive groups in progressive C.I.O. and A. F. of L. unions. Philip Murray, at the last United Auto Workers convention, took public notice of Dubinsky's sinister interference in the internal affairs of that union.

These disruptive activities constitute an important part of Dubinsky's daily work. They are carried through systematically under supervision of a special department headed by the political analyst of the I.L.G.W.U., the notorious Jay Lovestone.

This center has direct contact with the most reactionary forces in the

State Department and, through the State Department, with reactionary elements throughout the world. Its purpose is to promote disharmony and provoke an anti-Soviet war.

The Dubinsky forces formally supported the recent war, but hoped it would exhaust the Soviet Union and bar that country from playing a world role. They enthusiastically supported Churchill in opposing the opening of a Second Front, advocated a prolonged war, and cooled considerably toward Roosevelt after the Teheran and Yalta agreements.

Dubinsky stood by the fascist Polish Government-in-Exile until the last minute and his clique of the *New Leader* even goes so far as to whitewash the anti-Semitic Cardinal Hlond who condoned the Kielce pogrom. They stood by Mikhailovich until his execution as a traitor to his people, and now try to enshrine his memory. They instigated and financed the split in the Socialist Party of Italy.

Dubinsky endorsed Churchill's infamous Fulton, Mo., speech and crossed a picket line to honor him at a banquet. Dubinsky and his crowd enthusiastically support atom-bomb diplomacy. They endorsed British and U.S. intervention in Greece and back the fascist king. They are apologists for British imperialism in Palestine, and Dubinsky is the proud recipient of the King's medal for services rendered. Dubinsky's vice-president, Israel Feinberg, went to Germany on an

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A. F. of L. mission and came back advocating a soft peace and the rebuilding of German industry. Mark Starr, Educational Director of the I.L.G.W.U., went to Japan as MacArthur's labor advisor. Wherever reaction needs a labor trouble-shooter, Dubinsky supplies one.

PROBLEMS THAT MUST BE TACKLED

All these reactionary policies are in conflict with the basic sentiments of the needle trade workers who constitute one of the most anti-fascist sections of American labor.

What is the perspective for these workers, both as regards their union problems and the broader political issues which affect them just as directly and deeply?

The convention, scheduled for Cleveland in June, from all appearances will be a platform for reactionary politicians and all sorts of renegades and outcasts of the European Socialist movement. The rank and file can hardly hope for anything constructive from it. The struggle to change the disastrous course of the union will not end with the convention. It must become a day-to-day struggle in the shops and the union. The 17,000 Left-wingers, as always in the past, will be a powerful influence.

Dubinsky's present reactionary policies, applied to the industry, will lead to a rapid deterioration of working standards and imperil the very life of the union. A danger signal

is the recent agreement in the dress industry, for which Dubinsky claims "personal credit," which opens the way for a 7 per cent wage cut if the cost of living goes down.

The Dubinsky leadership cannot be depended on to safeguard the union's gains. The progressive forces must alert the workers against the employers' attacks, which are already spreading throughout the industry in the form of unofficial wage cuts, and organize them to force union action on the many unsolved problems of the industry.

Among these problems is, for instance, the organization of the unorganized in New York and out-of-town, especially the chain stores and big mail order houses. These open shops are a serious menace to the organized workers. According to the last General Executive Board, there are more than 100,000 unorganized workers in the industry.

Then there is the wage differential between New York City and out-of-town smaller centers. Continued neglect of these problems will hasten unemployment in the larger centers and intensify the competition between New York City and out-of-town and force down the standards of the organized workers.

There is the problem of overlapping between the unions in the ladies' and men's garment industries. This must be tackled through peaceful and orderly channels. Disputes such as developed in Rochester can only be harmful to both unions.

There is also the problem of eliminating discrimination against Negro workers, who today are limited to the least skilled trades. This was raised by the progressives, but not concretely enough, nor with sufficient boldness. There must be action enabling Negro workers to enter the highest skilled trades, as operators, cutters, etc. The progressives must not hesitate to raise the issue just because Zimmerman will accuse them of creating racial disharmony. There can be no real harmony where discrimination exists. Zimmerman should be forced to back his noble words about Negro equality with deeds.

The fight for union democracy, not in form but in fact, which was raised during the election campaign, must be continued in day-to-day struggle. So long as local autonomy is denied to hundreds of out-of-town locals which are under the thumb of Dubinsky's appointees, no real democracy can exist in any part of the union.

The flippancy with which the union leadership approaches these problems, its irresponsible talk against strikes, the confidence it fosters in the good intentions of the bosses and the soundness and permanency of the employers' relations with the union, can only create dangerous illusions and weaken the resistance to employer attacks on the workers' living standards.

The workers cannot place their destiny in the hands of Dubinsky's

"bright young men moving around the countryside with cameras making time and motion studies to speed the needle trade workers so production costs can be lowered and wages raised."

Nor can they depend on officers who take "refresher courses" and listen to lectures from such "great friends of labor as Henry Kaiser and Eric Johnston" (Riesel, *New York Post*). This bankrupt policy has resulted in 45-cent minimum scales and mass dissatisfaction and revolt, as in the Maryland-Virginia and other Districts.

A CHALLENGING QUESTION

A challenging question to all familiar with the history of the needle trades is: How is it that I.L.G.W.U. membership tolerates these betrayals? Two basic factors account for this situation:

1. The internal struggle in the union which lasted for years.
2. Some serious errors by the Left wing forces.

From 1922 to 1933 the I.L.G.W.U. was led almost to the brink of ruin as a result of the mass expulsion policy initiated by the Social-Democratic leaders. The situation was accentuated by the economic crisis of 1933.

During the mass upswing in organization, after the birth of N.R.A. in 1933, the needle trade workers, oppressed by miserable conditions, revolted against the open shop. They carried through a great strike which tied up the industry and resulted in

turning the skeleton organization almost overnight into a union of hundreds of thousands.

The Left-wing forces brought forward every progressive policy in the union, and kept alive the spirit of unionism during the most difficult days of the depression; through their agitation and organization, they prepared the ground for this mass revolt. However, they failed to realize the opportunity presented by the strike to restore unity in the ranks of the workers. They remained for a time isolated in the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union which represented only a small minority of the workers. The mass of new workers entered the I.L.G.W.U. This gave the Dubinsky machine the opportunity to entrench itself.

The progressive forces, to this day, are paying for this costly mistake despite their great contribution to the building of the union. To this day, the most important branches of the industry—such as the dress-makers numbering about 65,000 and the miscellaneous locals numbering about 50,000 workers, mostly Italian, Negro and Spanish—are dominated by the Dubinsky leadership.

The Jewish workers, among whom the Left Wing has its main strength, are older persons, thousands of them retiring yearly, leaving the Jewish workers a minority in the industry. The problems of reaching the newer workers therefore assumes ever greater importance.

These workers, new to the labor

movement, unfamiliar with the background and history of the I.L.G.W.U., have not been integrated into the life of the union. In the out-of-town centers, they do not even have the right to elect their local officers. (Through appointed officers, Dubinsky also controls a large section of Convention delegates.)

Despite the boasting of the I.L.G.W.U. education department, it has done little to educate the masses of these workers in the principles of unionism. The progressive forces have no access to these workers, a large number of whom work in the cheaper garment line. During the election period, the business agent, the only one identified with the union, who controls their jobs, brings these workers to the polling place with instructions to vote for the administration slate. These workers hold the balance of power in many locals.

Not until the rank and file progressive workers begin to develop systematic work among this section of the membership on day-to-day issues, and begin to take cognizance of their special problems as Italians, Negro, and Spanish workers, will these thousands become a conscious force influencing the policies and direction of the union.

This is the task which the progressive forces must learn to master. There is no earthly reason why Negro workers who vote for Pete Cacchione should vote for Antonini, or why Spanish and Puerto Rican

workers who support the A.L.P. and Marcantonio should remain passive or else support the Dubinsky-Zimmerman administration.

The election campaign has demonstrated the basic importance of building the Communist Party among the garment workers. In those local unions where the Party has a mass base the progressive forces were able to develop a more effective campaign, to bring the issues to the forefront, and to win greater strength and influence among the workers.

The Communists in the I.L.G.W.U. are among the most loyal and de-

voted builders of the union. They were always to be found in the front ranks of every struggle to advance the union's interests. They have no interests separate and apart from other workers, and are ready to cooperate with all workers to advance the interests of the workers in their own union and the labor and progressive movement.

The building of the Communist Party among the garment workers, especially the new workers, will give greater strength and vitality to the forces fighting to bring their union back to the path of progress.

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