

# Garments, Unions and Strikes

(Decorations by Jerger)

By JOSEPH ZACK.

It would take an Anatole France or Emile Zola to portray the exceedingly interesting, rapid developments in the needle trades industry—the rapid turns in policy, the most insidious political and economic maneuvers of the various factors, parties and groups involved; a cauldron of nationalities, group interests, big capital, small bourgeoisie, Tammany Hall, graft and corruption; socialist party and socialistic union bureaucracy, anarchist syndicalist groups and the big new force which at present influences the politics of all groups—the organized left wing, led by the Communists—laboratory of politics, played in the midst of the politically most advanced section of the

A. F. of L. union out of the picture. Here you meet the first case of expulsion.

Then when the socialist bureaucracy got into control they became very practical, so much so that some members thought there was no difference between old Sam's friends and them. Thereupon the anarchists, who were then in their prime, picked up the discontent and captured some offices, and there we had a little more expelling. But the real "trouble" started when the Trade Union Educational League got into the picture. First the bureaucracy tried to ignore it, then some of them tried to play politics with it, then they got the hysterics and started to expel. But this time the opposing side, organized and led by the T. U. E. L., learned something about tactics from past experiences. After a few months most of the expellers were kicked out of office by those they sought to expel in the most spectacular fight of its kind the American labor movement has yet seen.

But it was not the expulsions that really broke the neck of the old bureaucracy; the expulsions were merely the match applied to a powder magazine. The real cause was that for years the earnings of the needle workers were going down, due to the shortening of seasons. The employers got away with their tricks of moving their factories out of the organized centers into small unorganized towns. The big employers gave up their factories and transformed themselves into merchants (jobbers) that had their garments made per bundle orders from small sweatshops (contractors), thru whom they escaped responsibility for union conditions, and sold the garments thus produced in retail stores.

The old bureaucracy, partly because it was corrupt and partly because of stupidity and laziness, did not do anything to remedy this situation. As this had situation came to a head the bureaucracy grew more despotic and indifferent to the interests of the members. The left wing had a sensible and constructive program, and knew how to utilize the bureaucracy's backwardness and mistakes, and finally won.

The above only applies to the ladies' garment and fur workers. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers' officials, once considered amongst the most progressive, but who also grew stale in their offices since their successful rebellion against old Sam Gompers, at first refused to join in the expulsion policy. They claimed to have a cleverer way of beating the left wing. The success of the left wing in the other trades and its powerful reflex upon the members of the Amalgamated got the officials scared out of their wits and they also got the hysterics, and like an ugly prostitute dropping its camouflage and embellishments, they threw off their masks of progressivism overnight, and here we had some more expelling, of which good use has been made by the lefts in the preliminary skirmishes that took place as a result of it.

## First Round of Battle with the Employers.

Considerable of the old bureaucracy were crowded out of the picture. The left wing was determined to make good against the employers and get improved conditions for the workers. Agreements were expiring all around and we had not even the time to get thru any of the reforms that would change the old, creaking union plow into a modern tractor. After some preliminaries, the employers hit us

at our strongest point, the furriers. The old bureaucracy played on open strike-breaking tactics, in which they were supported by Wm. Green, president of the A. F. of L.; H. C. Frayne, New York state representative of the A. F. of L., and the entire official socialist party crowd, the deceased Meyer London included. The left wing, leading the union, utilized the situation to cement the strikers into a militant army and got all sorts of support from unexpected sources as a result of it. It was a hard-fought struggle, with plenty of big, shrewd maneuvers, to which Wm. Green can testify to his sorrow. A struggle in which they were all laid over the table and got their fill at the hands of the young union leaders of the left



American labor movement with the shrewdest political machines of the middle and petty bourgeoisie (Tammany Hall) and the best in the working class, the Workers' Party, with the socialist or rather the Jewish Daily Forward sandwiched in between. If any one politician looks for a kick in life the needle trades is the place for it, as Wm. Green, president of the A. F. of L., can testify from his recent experiences.

## Characteristics of the Needle Industry.

It is an industry composed mainly of small shops, except in the men's garments and millinery, where big plants made their appearance. The workers are predominantly skilled mechanics, Jewish and Italian, they are sentimental, temperamental, excitable, philosophical, seditious and what not. There are other nationalities, Poles, Lithuanians, Finns, Germans, all the national cities of Europe. With the simplification of the processes of production, semi-skilled native elements have been entering the industry in numbers in recent years.

The wages vary from \$600 a year to \$1,100 on the average up to \$1,800. All in all there are about 600,000 workers in the needle industry, of whom about 400,000 are in the east, the rest spread all over the rest of the U. S. A.

## Needle Trades Bureaucracy Does a Little Expelling.

OLD Sam Gompers originally started with some Irishmen and Germans to organize the vast army of needle workers. These people thought a union job would be as good as being a grocer or shining shoes politically to Murphy, of Tammany Hall, and that's where, historically speaking, the trouble started. The socialist party in its heyday, with its big Jewish daily, the Forward, got after Gompers and his crowd and got control of the unions. Old Sammy was sore at the socialist party for years on account of this. Only in his last days did he try to forgive and forget in order not to play into the hands of the left wing. Sidney Hillman, at present president of the A. C. W., and J. Schlossberg, now secretary-treasurer, had the courage in those days to tell Sam's bosom friend, T. Rickert, president of the United Garment Workers, to go plumb to hell when the latter railroaded the convention in Tennessee and made a sell-out in the settlement of a New York clothing workers' strike. Hillman and Schlossberg formed a union outside the A. F. of L., and this so-called dual union grew in power and strength and crowded the



Someone is always taking the joy out of life.

wing. The result of the fight was that the furriers achieved the first notable victory of organized labor in recent years by getting the 40-hour five-day week and substantial wage increases, which makes them the best-paid workers in the needle trades. The victory could have been more complete and quicker if not for the strike-breaking interference of the right wing bureaucracy. Wm. Green got so sore as a result of what he got that he is now trying to kick up some more trouble for himself by uniting with the discredited old furriers' bureaucracy trying to stage a probe of the conduct of the furriers' strike, probably as a preliminary to new wholesale persecutions of the left wing.

## The Cloakmakers' Strike.

THE defeat the right wing got in the Furriers' Union as a result of its strike-breaking tactics was so shattering that it almost created an open rupture amongst themselves. Hence in the cloakmakers' strike they camouflaged their tactics carefully. In public they talk militantly, their press writes militantly, but their sabotage is quite apparent from their covered maneuvers with the governor of New York and from the encouragement they give to scabbing and to shifting production outside of New York, as illustrated in Philadelphia, two hours from New York, where the agreement expired during the strike and not even the demands for 40 hours, etc., was put up, the agreement having been renewed with a slight wage increase, practically on the old conditions, thus encouraging the New York employers to shift some of their production outside.

The leopard may travel a different road, but he has not changed his nature. We know what our enemies are. The employers are thoroughly scared of us and will support the old bureaucracy more than ever. The outstanding fact is that it took the left wing to lead the workers on to an offensive against the employers for the 40-hour week, higher wages, job control, etc., while the rest of the unions under reactionary leadership are meekly surrendering or accepting crumbs from the table of the industrial overlords and kings of American capitalism. Let us hope that this offensive will spread to all the exploited, organized and unorganized, for the 40-hour five-day week, higher wages, job control and a strengthening of the working class everywhere.



"LEFT" is Right.