

YEAR OF THE LEFT WING AMONG FIFTH AVENUE NEEDLE WORKERS

By JOSEPH ZACK.

(Concluded from last Friday).

The employers were in an uproar at the nerve of a small, tame local daring to antagonize these millionaire firms, among the biggest in the needle industry, by an organization drive. They got together and got busy, as a result of which arrests began among our leaflet distributors for littering the sidewalks. Our woman organizer was arrested every few days for obstructing the traffic with her open-air meetings. Police and detectives began to appear everywhere.

Meanwhile the conference committee of the union was negotiating. First the bosses ignored all the demands of the union except the increase of wages for tailors only. Under no condition would they recognize the union so far as the dressmakers were concerned. The negotiations were exploited in our propaganda in the organization drive. An injunction move was made through the lawyer of the bosses' association and effectively countered.

Employers Weaken.

Meanwhile, under pressure of the organization drive, approaches were made by the employers and some informal conferences took place, according to which they were ready to grant the tailors the 40-hour week and 10 per cent increase in wages. They were even willing to give the time agreement through a supplementary agreement according to the ability of each firm, but nothing for the dressmakers. It was a tempting bait for us to make a highly profitable sell-out for the benefit of the tailors at the expense of the dressmakers, and if we would refuse them the right-wingers, who were already working indirectly with the bosses, would keep the tailors from supporting the strike. They were already spreading rumors that the tailors' interests were being sacrificed for the benefit of the dressmakers, uttering threats of ousting the left wing leadership, etc.

Exposes Bosses' Trickery.

The organization drive was meanwhile going at fever heat. The strike machinery was ready. It was Friday and the strike call was to be issued next Tuesday. Many of the old timers were shivering in their boots at the dash with which the union was challenging these big aristocratic firms. In whispers it was said, "Let us hope that the union will at least be saved—no more of these inexperienced left wing youngsters." The union's conference committee arranged a formal conference with the employers in order to find out whether the informal proposals were not merely a maneuver to line up the tailors thru getting us to reject these proposals, and so it was. In formal conference the employers were not ready to grant what their unofficial representative said they were. They even made some counter-demands.

Tailors Line Up.

This helped us to line up the tailors. We did not break off negotiations. However, we needed more time for the organization drive. Meanwhile the employers got very little production in the shops. The strike call was delayed one week. The employers were up in the air. Tense nervousness prevailed among their female workers. The employers had cleared the decks for a strike Tuesday. There was no work cut up for another week. They did not know how many of the dressmakers would respond. This was a week of "strike on the job" with pay, and it cost the companies tens of thousands of dollars. In this week the union did its best shop propaganda.

Try Bribery.

Finally the employers, driven panicky by these unusual methods which they had never experienced before in the trade, began to heavily "sacrifice" in order to kill the effect of our organization drive. They gave wage increases to thousands of the unorganized dressmakers and also reduced their hours to 44 and in a few cases to 40. We knew this would have quite an effect on these organized, raw female workers that had no union experience.

The strike call went out and the response of the dressmakers, as we expected, was very poor. The Fifth Avenue Association got busy and the district was flooded with police outside and inside the building, industrial squad, private police and detectives. The very first days we had dozens of arrests in a strike of only 1,500 workers. The special picket committee of about 30 was under great handicap as its visiting committees appearing in the strike district found themselves shadowed. Nevertheless they visited about 60 shops within ten days and were effective in about 28.

Picketing with signs was an innovation and the employers tried hard to prevent it. The picket line was quite aggressive in the first dash and the whole glamor of publicity, strike atmosphere, pickets, etc., was very effective in keeping the rich, charitable ladies away from their shopping pleasures as they do not like to be annoyed by the open physical display of the class struggle.

Meanwhile the right wing in the union that had been swept off its feet by these rapid developments, began to raise its head again. The right wing would surely play a dangerous game.

The treasury of the union was low, so the conference committee made a settlement, and a good one. A 40-hour week (a la furriers) as against 44 hours before, \$3-\$5 increase in wages for everybody that went on strike—and we placed in union shops most of the dressmakers in whose shops we had lost. As a result of the drive we won 300 new members, mostly dressmakers, or a 30% increase in membership.

We won this in honest struggle without selling out the exploited costume dressmakers, and we won more than the right wingers could when previously, with their "sell-out" policy, under more favorable circumstances, they got only an increase in wages. The strike committee, including the right wingers, unanimously accepted the settlement.

The whole strike and organization campaign cost about \$9,000. Still, the right wingers now clamor that we spent too much money, that the strike was a failure because we did not get forty weeks' time guarantee, that we hired Communist gangsters, etc. By the latter they mean eight special pickets, militants who were taken from their shops downtown at the wages they earn because we could not recruit such elements from among the elderly tailors. These very right wingers who in our last stoppage had professional gangsters whom they paid the usual high prices and who took money from both sides, now pretend to be indignant at our getting honest, able-bodied radical workers on the picket line. But this is only a camouflage.

The fact is that the bosses have somewhat recuperated from the shock of our drive; they are terrorizing the tailors thru the right wing, saying that if they do not oust the left wing leadership and get an administration that will behave and abstain from organizing the dressmakers, they will get rid of the tailors altogether.

Behind these silly accusations are real selfish, stupid craft interests and the "old timers" listen. There is not the path of struggle, better less at some one else's expense by the old fake methods than honest struggle for the workers' interests irrespective of craft. The method is to sacrifice the semi-skilled and unskilled for temporary, even illusory privileges to the skilled.

We are on the eve of new elections in Local 38. The selfish craft interests of our "old timers" are worked up to a pitch. The general situation in the ILGWU is favorable for our "old timers." The bosses' interests and those of the right wingers in the local and in the international coincide. The left wing has a record of accomplishment. It increased the membership, got improved conditions, and strengthened the union. Can the old timers fool the members and overcome the effect of our successful policy and put the union back to sleep for years? We don't think so.