

The New Open Shop Drive

By JOSEPH ZACK

150,000 miners are out on strike against wage reductions. The avowed view of the interests in control of that industry is to smash the Miners' Union.

In the needle trades in New York, open shop conditions are being established by the employers with the cooperation of the Executive Council of the A. F. of L. led by the president of the Civic Federation, Matthew Woll. The Master Plumbers' Association of New York under the direction of the organized building trades bosses, break their agreement with the Plumbers' Union and make a lock-out of 10,000 men in order to stop any new upward wage movements in this industry. In New England the textile industry for the last six months has seen an intensive drive to establish the 54-hour week in which McMahon, president of the U. T. W. A., A. F. of L. textile union cooperated.

The production record in a number of important industries shows a definite downward trend. These are a few of the weather signs indicating what is to come. Are we in for a period of industrial depression beginning right after the 1928 presidential elections? What is behind the present attack against labor? What is the most likely action of the A. F. of L. leadership? What can the left wing do in such a situation? These are a few of the questions our movement must have an answer for before long. We can already quite clearly perceive a few outstanding facts in this situation.

In the open shop drive of 1919-22 the capitalists took advantage of the depression in industry, consequent to post-war stabilization on a peace basis, to rob the workers of whatever advantages they gained during the war and to drive the workers' standards in several important industries even below the pre-war level. The A. F. of L. lost all its war gains, that is, over a million members in this drive. American capital succeeded in reducing standards sufficiently to be able to get ahead of the other imperialist powers who weakened as a result of the world war and captured many of their markets.

These were the days of the great organization movement, Labor Party, LaFollette 3rd Party movement, etc. These were also days when the A. F. of L. leadership instead of heading this tremendous forward movement on the political and industrial fields, surrendered to the trusts and financial combines, who were tremendously strengthened during the war, and with the coming in of imperialist prosperity, the A. F. of L. bureaucracy having executed its first great post-war swing to the right, took the offensive against the militants by outlying the leaders of these forward movements that dared to continue in their progressive activities.

It was not sufficient however for American capital to drive labor backward to its pre-war standard and strength in order to maintain its position over the other imperialist powers whose production system was being re-established and stabilized at the expense of the workers, peasants, petty bourgeoisie and the middle classes. Production had to be driven upward at an enormous pace thru speed-up methods, labor saving machinery, etc. The A. F. of L. leadership cooperated in this and announced its new role of efficiency foremen officially in its so-called New Wage Theory resolution adopted at the Atlantic City convention and forcefully demonstrated in what is known as the B. & O. plan.

Thus the employers succeeded in obtaining a 48 per cent increase in production at but 8 per cent additional expense incurred in wage increases and

bonus systems granted to skilled mechanics in industries especially favored by imperialist prosperity. To put such a policy across on the organized workers inside of the A. F. of L. was possible by the suppression, persecution and expulsion of progressive opponents. Thus we had the continual war inside the A. F. of L., a war in which the A. F. of L. bureaucracy had the whole support of the employers, the capitalist press and their government, a war which could be carried thru by arbitrary rule and the abolition of democracy inside the unions. The effect of this policy upon the unions prevented their growth and reduced the A. F. of L. membership far below the pre-war figure, present estimates being as about 2½ million as against 3 million when the U. S. entered the war.

It is the first time in the history of the American labor movement that a prosperity period is passing by without tremendous growth in membership organization, drives to organize the unorganized and big forward movements in general. The fact that in the midst of such prosperity there could even be a tremendous loss in membership shows that the A. F. of L. is rapidly deteriorating under the present leadership, that the policies of this leadership are diametrically opposed to the very evolution of capitalist production and industry and that if continued along these lines it may succumb to the fate that befell two great labor federations prior to the advent of the A. F. of L. in the United States. The capitalists of the U. S. have learned something since the days of the National Labor Union and the Knights of Labor. They have learned how to use advantageously a degenerated labor bureaucracy to obtain control over the very unions the workers build to defend themselves against their exploiters, and the bosses having the country's means and resources more under command than ever may decide to maintain a degenerated A. F. of L. as a shield and strike-breaking agency against the growth of revolutionary unionism. These are the prospects the workers are faced with on the eve of this new open shop drive.

That such a drive is coming there is no doubt in my mind. The Dawes plan has put in its work. American capital invested in the weakened capitalist empires of Europe has re-established their production and hence their competitive power on the world market. With the standard of living of millions of European workers reduced far below pre-war, re-established European industry, largely under American control is now competing with American industry controlled by the same interests, and this powerful club of European competition American capital is about to use again to drive the standards of the American workers further down. Lower wages, longer hours, more child labor, more women in industry into territories with cheaper labor power which is industrializing the agricultural area of the south, and west, more speed, more efficiency, more labor saving machinery, double up, this has been going on at a rapid pace since the war. But European capitalism has had a restoration for the time being. A precarious one, it is true, but there it is and the same drive has to be doubled up. American production has to be reestablished on a lower level of prices and at the expense of the workers; otherwise there will be a tremendous crash. Hence the new drive against labor.

What role the A. F. of L. bureaucracy will play in this, can be easily seen by anyone who wants to see it. The A. F. of L. bureaucracy has so heavily invested in capitalist industry directly and indirectly that its interests are inextricably inter-woven in the

fate of a possible crash. It will therefore continue to cooperate with imperialist capital, as a part of the exploiting class, to beat its competitors in the world market. The fact that nothing is being done to support the miners to save the Miners' Union while all energies are being put forward to smash the opposition to such a policy as exemplified by the war on the left wing and the wholesale expulsion shows that the A. F. of L. bureaucracy is ready not only to fall in with this line, but to even pave the way of capital in the downward revision of the standard of living for workers.

The edge of the oncoming depression may be taken off by American success in the Far East, by recognition of Soviet Russia and the granting of credits; by imperialist success in general. This accounts for the extraordinary imperialist activity of the U. S. of late. But even off such a success cheaper products are a pre-requisite and we can expect in any event that the benefits of such a prosperity of which only a part of the population was beneficiary will be considerably curtailed even under the most favorable circumstances. But even as it is the ballyhoo the capitalist press made about the workers getting prosperous, buying homes and automobiles, etc., was considerably exaggerated, and, but for the fact that even many of our own comrades became infected by this propaganda, I would not even mention it.

Analogies have been made on the affects of imperialist prosperity corrupting the labor movement between Britain and the U. S. It is true that we can profit by the experience in Britain to some extent, but there is a fundamental difference in this case between the effects of British imperialist prosperity and the one we have. Britain conquered politically the territories in which to dump the industrial products of the British Islands. It had a virtual monopoly of these markets. Britain at the height of its imperialist development had no important industrial rival, the other European states being in the main under feudal regimes based on agriculture. While the U. S. industries have outstripped great industrial giants with American capital plying both ends against the middle.

The effect of this is that whereas in Great Britain in its heyday of imperialism, the advantages the workers derived from it were pretty evenly divided among the industrial proletariat, particularly the organized skilled workers in the U. S., imperialist progress has under-mined even below pre-war level the conditions of millions of workers in industries subject to the international competition. How much did the bituminous miners, textile workers, needle workers, marine workers, etc., profit by this prosperity. Even the highly skilled in these industries were, in the main, adversely affected. What about the farmers who were bankrupted by the tens of thousands? The only ones that really profited were the skilled workers, particularly those that are organized and work in sheltered domestic industries like building construction, printing, railroads, etc.

Under radical leadership they could have profited much more even in these industries. The bosses assisted by the trade union bureaucracy got double the amount they granted in wage increases out of the workers by man-killing speed-up sectionalizing efficiency schemes, etc. The unorganized workers in general profited but little and that is in the form of steadier employment. And in order to get their moral cooperation and substitute the benefits of unionism, they were given company unions to take

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up their complaints, group insurance and sick benefit schemes, bonus and profit-sharing schemes and many other forms of subtle bribery to divert them from real unionism. The workers for lack of anything better, and in face of the inactivity of the A. F. of L., took what they could get. Thus, instead of the growth of unionism during this prosperity period, the bosses gave the workers company unions, while Woll & Company were busy in banking, insurance and fighting the reds.

Is it not a tragedy to have a labor movement of three million living thru a prosperity period and the only notable effort of organizing the unorganized was Passaic, and that was started in spite of the A. F. of L. bureaucracy and was fought by them in true strike-breaking style. To organize the unorganized at this time would however more than ever jeopardize most seriously the imperialistic program to which the A. F. of L. leadership is committed. The orientation of the A. F. of L. leadership is not on the basis of the great masses of workers skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled, working in industries unfavorably situated, affected by imperialist prosperity, but on the basis of those favorably affected. The prosperity of the building and printing trades was due to the enormous surplus the bosses had which they preferred to hand out to the workers instead of risking the struggle. In these trades class-collaboration can be made to look like a success to politically backward workers. It is quite some time

since the A. F. of L. orientation has moved from the miners' union, its original base, to the building trades. The unions unfavorably affected by the imperialistic drive against organized labor are thus allowed to dwindle into mere shadows.

It is not to be expected, however, that strongly organized building trades employers will not take due advantage of the next chance they will get in the oncoming open shop drive. There is too much

STUDY IN REVENGE

Do a Chink an injury
and he'll kill himself at your door
when the sun sets. . .

Harm an Indian
and he'll camp on your trail
and poison the springs you drink from—
(Or tomahawk you
two hours before sunrise!)

But make an enemy
of a Capitalist,
and he'll ruin your credit at the bank—
Blacklist you,
fire you,
—Or make you join
the "Company Union!"

Take your pick.

potential radicalism for them even amongst the masses in the building industry. How much of the A. F. of L. will be left after the oncoming is hard to calculate. The A. F. of L. bureaucracy by its past indications continues to move to the right and will seek to protect its own interests and investments despoiling the union treasuries. How to save as much as possible from the present labor and gradually reconstitute it on a basis that follows the evolution of capitalism, this is the problem.

There is a great future of progress and mass influence in the offing. For our party the basis of which lies in the main in the masses of unorganized workers and the proper utilization of all our influence inside the existing labor organizations and the investment of all our strength for that purpose.

How to do it is the problem!



—LEBARBE.