

The Needle Trades, a Center of Struggle

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THE eyes of the labor movement are now focussed on the Needle Trades unions. These unions of "foreigners" in the past were looked upon as a sort of intrusion on the bona fide labor movement that had to be tolerated for the sake of a correct official policy. These "Jews", "Dagoes", "Polacks", etc., are now the prized objective of the entire reactionary officialdom of the A. F. of L. How did this come about?

The organized Left Wing, that flexible, well-organized "invincible" combination of active militants inside the unions, pushed out the old degenerated bureaucracy, and transformed these organizations into militant organs of struggle against the employers.

One Year's Results

Within one year after assumption of control by the Left Wing, the 40-hour week was established in collective agreements affecting over 60,000 workers, wage increases were obtained of from 10 to 25 per cent, and the days of buying union officials, of graft and corruption were gone. Instead of sleepy, slow, corrupt unions, a new giant was walking through the factories, not afraid to fight and intent upon strengthening all needle unions by amalgamation.

All the old gang of soft job holders in the A. F. of L. were struck dumb with horror.

The readers of LABOR UNITY probably recall how William Green and H. C. Frayne, the latter the New York representative of the A. F. of L., interfered in the strike of the New York Furriers and attempted to settle it over the heads of the Furriers' strike committee on terms worse than the ones the bosses were ready to grant.

Had they succeeded, they would have "re-organized" the Furriers' union, and by this expelled the Left Wing. But they suffered a severe and decisive defeat, and the Furriers

Another result is that conditions in the union fields are, by co-operation of reactionary officials, allowed to grow worse; the companies arrogantly defy the union, refuse to allow organizers on their property, as at the Hudson Coal Company properties in the anthracite, or refuse to pay for "dead work", demand higher loading of cars (with coal that falls off and brings no money to the miner), decline to keep the safety laws, and continually increase the scope of coal cutting and coal loading machines so as to throw men out of work.

Even in solidly organized Illinois, numerous companies have closed down for long periods, and then reopened on the basis of no payment of back wages, or only partial payment, through some stock selling scheme, or fake "Advance" arrangement. The Doyeraux mine, near Springfield, is a typical case. It reopened recently, with a month's back pay due the workers, which it proposes to liquidate under a scheme which will take it over three years to accomplish.

The Miners Must Fight

It is this growing arrogance of the mine owner, the constant crumbling of the edges of the unionized territory, the constant relative decrease in production in union fields, and the knowledge that next April a desperate strike will probably be initiated, with odds against the union, and treacherous officials leading it, that makes the miner wild. At last he is beginning to listen to the progressives, who have urged him all along to clean out the corruptionists and organize the un-organized fields. The miners will demand a fair count of their votes, which, if obtained, will surely show that the progressives were elected.

ers got the 40-hour week and a large increase of wages, in spite of the encouragement the bosses got from the president of the A. F. of L.

They "Investigate" a Victory

The workers understood the game and Mr. Green could not break that strike, though it was a long strike due to his efforts. After the strike was won, the Executive Council of the A. F. of L. staged an "investigation" of it, with the purpose of renewing the attack on the Furriers' union at an opportune time, which the council may think fitting at any moment.

We thought that from their defeat in the Furriers' union, the A. F. of L. bureaucracy and their friends among the so-called "socialist" leaders had learned how not to break strikes in the needle trades. But now we see they did not.

Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

When the New York Cloakmakers' strike started, the right wing leaders gave themselves an honest appearance, although they said they were willing to settle without the 40-hour week, with but a slight increase in wages, and to concede to the bosses the right to discharge 10 per cent of their workers in order to increase the efficiency of production as recommended by a commission appointed by Governor Al Smith at their request. When this proposal of theirs was rejected by the general strike committee, they spoke in the strike halls aggressively for all demands.

Outwardly, the appearance was given as if the union was united and had the support of the A. F. of L. Even the Left Wing was to some extent fooled by this policy. The reactionaries were given control of several strategic committees and they were well represented in all other committees.

Secret Betrayal

Soon, however, it was apparent that they were working secretly with the bosses. The employers knew what was going on in the closed circles of the union. They knew the amount of money on hand. They knew the secret minimum terms on which the union committee was ready to settle. Any secret or unofficial approval of important firms to settlement, was immediately divulged to the Employers' association.

The Law Committee and the Out-of-Town Committee in control of the right-wingers, Upped off the scab shops ahead of visits of the Picket Committee. At the investigation of International President Sigman, the governor of the state of New York was gotten to try to compel the union to submit to compulsory arbitration. The right wing managers encouraged their members to scab and right wing unions were tipped off not to support the Relief Committee.

Masses Break Injunction

When the union did not submit to the compulsory arbitration proposed through the governor, one of the most extensive and drastic injunctions in the history of the industry suddenly appeared to protect scabs, as a result of which thousands of pickets were arrested and haled into court. For the union decided rightly that the injunction should be defied.

Several times the employers were ready to settle, but each time the right wing officials prevented the settlement by telling the employers through their secret connections not to settle. They accommodated the bosses by helping them have work done in union shops outside of New York.

Victory Despite All

Despite all this, the union under left wing leadership forced the em-

ployers to settle on terms far better than the right wing promised to settle on at the beginning of the strike. The new agreement includes the 40-hour week; wage increases of from 10 to 20 per cent, and even on the point of the employers' right to 10 per cent discharge, upon which the union had to yield, it obtained important safeguards and restrictions such as a minimum of 32 weeks' wages per year and no discharge for union activity, etc.

The right wing and the capitalist press allied with it, howled that this was a defeat, but the workers understood the game and knew that under the circumstances it was a victory.

The workers approved the settlement almost unanimously. This got the right wing officials mad. It is known that Matthew Woll, Thomas McMahon, Morris Sigman and John L. Lewis, had a meeting at which it was decided to break up the whole thing. There were 8,000 workers for contractors still on strike. Sigman, the International President, got the Contractors' association to threaten a lockout if the union did not submit to their ultimatum. The union did not submit. The lockout was smashed, and the contractors did the submitting.

Disruption Becomes Open

Sigman now played his ace. He suspended the strike committees. He suspended the Joint Board and the executives of the left wing locals comprising the majority of the membership of the International. He did this without charges, without trials, and appointed a new strike committee pledged in advance to arbitration, appointed new executive boards, and appointed himself as strike leader.

All this was done on the pretense that the strike was illegal, although he himself and his vice-president were members of the leading strike committees, although the General Executive Board controlled by him had approved of the strike, and the A. F. of L. convention, itself, had endorsed the strike.

A Fascist Program

Sigman counts on the workers' submission because they have been starved for five months of strike. He counts on the 300 gangsters he has mobilized from the underworld. He counts on their protection by the police in gang violence against the Left Wing. He counts on the backing of the whole trade union bureaucracy. He counts upon the government, federal and state, to imprison and deport left wingers. He counts upon support of the *openshop employers, who, like himself, raise the false issue of "Communism" and "reds" against any militant unionism.*

By these measures, and by his turning from the workers to call upon "the community at large" to crush class struggle, Sigman has shown himself blood-brother to the leaders of fascism.

The Membership Stands Firm

The conference Sigman called of the self-styled "Committee for the Preservation of the Trade Unions" is but a mask for disruption and splitting of the unions which the workers will not permit him to rule and betray. Moreover, Sigman and other right wing needle union leaders, intend to prevent amalgamation, these unions' first necessity.

That the workers will not permit either disruption or betrayal was shown on December 18, when 18,000 of the membership poured into Madison Square Garden, unanimously adopted a resolution condemning Sigman and his strike-breaking, demanded he resign, declared they would not be terrorized, but would support their legally elected left wing officials and would eliminate fascist elements and repel all attacks on their union.