

The Open Shop Drive in the Needle Trades

By Joseph Zack

THE government dissolved the two Joint Boards of the cloak and dressmakers union and of the furriers, leaders arrested, martial law has been declared in the areas where the needle workers work and congregated. "The union has been reorganized by a committee headed by Sigman, Schachtman, Woll, Grady and Frayne, which has the support of the employers, and the workers were ordered to join the reorganized union under pain of discharge." Deportation, arrests, etc., many of those who refused were threatened with dire consequences.

I am sure it would be a surprise to you to see a few headlines like these appearing in the newspapers, depicting the fight of the A. F. L. bureaucracy against the left wing. You are accustomed to read, "A. F. L. Dissolves Joint Board", "Leaders Arrested on A. F. L. Charges of Advocating Violence Against Property and for Wholesale Bribery", "A. F. L. Appoints Reorganization Committee to Take Charge of the Defunct Joint Board", "Employers Recognize the International. Affiliated with the A. F. L.", "Workers are Registering with the International", etc., etc.

A Fight of the Bosses Against the Union

If the truth were to be told by the capitalist press, describing the support of the local government, employers associations, Civic Federation, etc., as it is in life, the first set of headlines would be a more correct interpretation of events now transpiring in the needle trades. I doubt whether among the 200,000 needle workers in New York the A. F. L. leaders could get 5,000 to voluntarily follow them. I am sure the right wing could not get 200 active unionists to volun-

teer their services for their dirty work. Take away the support of the local government, the Police Department, courts, and the bosses associations, and there would be no fight, because the workers are in the overwhelming majority on one side—against Sigman, Schachtman, Woll, etc.

For all practical purposes this is a fight between the bosses associations supported by the government, the capitalist press, Woll and company, and on the other side the unions represented by the Joint Boards. But the bosses have a big advantage. They are able to use the union label and union auspices and thus fool many workers in their attempt to establish a boss controlled union. To put it pictorially, suppose you see a gigantic capitalist exploitation machine, Matthew Woll, as the A. F. L. priest, is in front and sprinkling the holy water of unionism, and with great ceremonies a tiny paper is pasted on that machine. Then come nearer, and you find it is the A. F. L. union label. This is the role the A. F. L. leadership is playing in this fight. It is riveting the chains of exploitation on the needle workers.

Effects on Working Conditions

The workers, after having won thru long struggles the 40 hour week, substantial wage increases, are beginning to understand the game. They feel it in the worsened conditions in the shops. Overtime is not being paid, piece prices are fixed downward. There is plenty of smuggling below the fixed wage scale. The workers do not trust Sigman and Schachtman's business agents. They therefore seek to adjust shop grievances as best they can, as the boss does not recognize the Joint Board business agents (the lefts). As to where the work-

ers stand, well, the Joint Board calls a Madison Square Garden meeting (20,000) and it will be packed full of cloakmakers or furriers. But if Woll and company call one in Bethelven Hall (1,200) they will have hard luck.

There is a crisis in the industry, employment is low, the seasons seem to get shorter and shorter every year. Still, under left wing leadership the workers were able to increase wages appreciably and shorten hours. The bosses could not lick the union in the strike. Now however, assisted by the A. F. L. bureaucracy, they see their opportunity and they are taking advantage of it to establish open shop conditions in the industry. Many of the workers in the shops now feel like after a defeat. They are laying low, exhausted by long struggles. But they are grinding their teeth in resentment against the A. F. L. bureaucracy. The union spirit is there. The workers despite the long struggles and bad conditions, have contributed over \$200,000 to the fight and more of it is coming. This is rank and file money. It represents a tremendous moral strength.

Woll and company, heading the Civic Federation did not leave unused a single weapon of this body of open shop employers, no matter how low and despicable, to defeat the workers and force them under the yoke of this treacherous gang. There was a veritable reign of injunctions against the Joint Board. The police gangsters known as the Industrial Squad led the gangsters of the underworld employed by Woll and company in an onslaught upon the pickets of the Joint Board. The leaders were framed up and thrown into jail; union information given in confidence to Woll and company, as

union officials, was betrayed to the police and lies were added to it in regular provocateur style. This is the unionism of Mathew Woll, Green, Sigman, Schachtman and company; the blackest nightmare that has ever come to reality.

Workers Undefeated

With all this it would be the greatest error to think that the needle workers have been defeated. There never was an army that became so compact as a result of a righteous struggle, and they learned something. A much more class conscious body of union men and women has come out of this battle. Already there are strong indications of the tide turning from despairing resentment and opposition to a counter attack against the employers and their straw men the trade union bureaucracy. Unionism in the needle trades has gotten set back at the hands of the employers in the past.

This time the employers partially succeeded with the assistance of the A. F. L. bureaucracy to wrest from the workers the fruits of their recent strikes.

But this will be a short lived victory. Morally this body of workers is more solid than ever and already there are conspicuous breaks in the employers ranks as shown by the action of the Fur Trimming Employers Association in their signing with the Joint Board. There are breaks appearing in the right wing ranks. The left wing is preparing for a new offensive with the fur workers in the vanguard. Out of this ordeal unionism will emerge stronger than ever in the needle trades industry and the first big nails in the coffin of the A. F. L. bureaucracy is in Woll and company are being driven by the workers in the needle trades.