

# THE TRADE UNIONS IN N. Y. AND THE UNEMPLOYED

(From Report to the T.U.U.C.)

By J. ZACK

WITH more than 17,000,000 unemployed in the United States, and in New York City alone nearly a million and a half, no one can seriously think about the labor movement and the development of it without organizing the unemployed, which means to say that any of our trade unions that do not put the unemployed question as a major order of business in their everyday activities, cannot really succeed because they narrow themselves down to only one part of the working class.

This is particularly important for those unions in the building trades, needle trades, and several other trades where unemployment is 50 per cent or more of the total number of workers that are working in that industry. In the Building Trades there is practically 80 per cent unemployed.

Unless a union has considerable influence among the unemployed, it will not be able to establish the necessary solidarity between the employed and unemployed to fight for better conditions.

**THE struggle of the unemployed** takes on certain forms somewhat different from what we have been accustomed to for years in the trade union movement. Because of this, many of our unions and opposition groups are slow to learn how to lead the unemployed workers. It takes them a long time to take up this struggle as a matter of their everyday work.

## RESOLUTIONS ARE ONLY THE FIRST STEP

They usually start with resolutions, and speeches, which is all right. These are the first steps, and then gradually they go over to some simple forms of struggle. I think we have already, as a result of the last few years, experiences on the basis of which we can make a much more determined effort on organizing the unemployed.

The unemployed now are far more embittered than they were a year ago. The employed have received three to four, and in some places their fifth wage cut, and are also far more in a mood of struggle than they were a year ago. We know that in the last three months it is already possible in a whole number of trades to develop an offensive to obtain wage increases.

A year ago, for instance, many of our strikes were purely defensive strikes, against wage cuts, lengthening of hours, etc. At present, of course, we still have struggles to prevent wage cuts. But there are a whole number of trades in New York where the workers organized in the militant unions can go over to the offensive, to demand wage increases.

The same thing can be noticed among the unemployed, as is shown by the many struggles around Home Relief Bureaus, rent strikes, etc. Therefore, this year it is necessary to bring this whole struggle of the unemployed and employed to a higher level.

**WHEN** this work started, we had the idea that activity amongst the unemployed is confined purely to problems arising in the industry as such. We had such a thing as exemption from paying dues, which is important, because when the unemployed are not exempt from paying dues they cannot remain in the organization. We had other such questions such as a demand on the bosses to set aside 2 per cent of the payroll for a fund to relieve those workers who are mostly in need of it; and some demonstrations in front of the offices of the Bosses Association.

## WIDEN STRUGGLES FOR UNEMPLOYED

But now we see that those unions that have started good work in this field beginning to look upon this question from a broader point of view. They are developing demands not only on the basis of

their particular trade, but organizing to get relief for their members from the Home Relief Bureaus. Some of them are beginning to participate in rent strikes, anti-eviction fights, demonstrations in front of the Gibson Committee, etc., etc.

The rent strike movement is growing into one of the largest movements in New York, involving not only employed, but unemployed workers. I think the comrades know that 50 per cent of the pay of the worker nowadays, and in some cases more than that, goes to the landlord. The landlord, even more so than other capitalists, has attempted to maintain the same rent as in 1926-27, although wages have gone down from 30 to 50 per cent and even more.

Around the rent strikes and generally in the activities amongst the unemployed, we can spread the idea of union organization amongst workers that we cannot reach otherwise, and particularly workers in the basic industries. We have seen that some of our trade unions, from merely backing a grievance of the unemployed, have broadened out their program, not only in the form of a resolution, but in action.

**I**n the needle trades we have had some successful struggles to compel the bosses to put aside 2 per cent of the payroll for the unemployed. In the fur dyeing trade settlements in several of the shops included 3 per cent. This is an important achievement.

## FIGHT FOR UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE INTENSIFIED

On the question of Unemployment Insurance, our trade unions (in this respect there was progress with our opposition groups in the A. F. of L.) have become more aggressive, as well as in the struggle for exemption from dues, assessments for the unemployed, and other such inner trade union demands.

The outstanding feature of our unions, however, is still the weakness in the unemployed question. For instance, most of our trade unions have developed practically no struggle against layoffs. Of course, where we have control of shops, that is, union control, we do not let them lay off the workers. But a struggle against layoffs as part of the struggle to organize workers, to gain influence in unorganized places, has not been carried on.

There are cases where in one blow the boss lays off 30 or 40 per cent of the crew. Often we know about it ahead of time. The whole question is not taken up seriously. Only here and there do we make an attempt.

Where we have considerable organization, we also fight for reduction of hours, but not yet from the point of view that there is mass unemployment, but from the point of view that it is a good proposition to reduce hours.

On this question the fakers have displayed more demagoguery than on anything else. They are the ones who talk about solving unemployment by having the six-hour day. Of course, they don't say at the same pay as before for the eight hours.

If a cut in hours were forced upon the bosses without a reduction in pay, this would mean a lot, and it is in this connection that we must relate our struggle for shorter hours with the unemployment question.

## OVERTIME WORK

On the question of overtime, some of our strongest unions are falling down. It is very hard for an unemployed worker to take some of our unions seriously when they talk about the interests of the unemployed and even demonstrate and put up a fight here and there, and at the same time they know that in the shops controlled by the union there is overtime work. This, if permitted to continue, will demoralize our industry

amongst the unemployed workers in these trades.

The fight against speed-up must also be a part of our struggle against unemployment.

And, while supporting and fighting on the basis of the general demands for Unemployment Insurance and relief, reduction of rent, demands of a general nature applied to everybody, we must add local demands according to the conditions in that particular trade.

**A FEW** words on the organization method. We used to start with a sort of an inner union committee, with the idea its problem is to handle the unemployed members of the union. Of course, these committees could not solve the unemployed question. It is beyond the power of the union to provide jobs and to provide relief.

Later on, when our committees in the trade unions began to operate as they really should, leading the workers to obtain relief from the bosses and the government, they still remained very narrow. They were parts of the industrial union itself, and the workers that were not members of the industrial union, members of the A. F. of L. or the unorganized, felt they could not join.

## USE POLICY OF UNITED FRONT

The policy now proposed is that although our unions should take the initiative and provide the experienced forces to organize unemployed committees and councils in the different industries, these groups are not to be just auxiliaries of the industrial union, but should pursue a united front policy from the very beginning, and organize and involve in the movement the workers in their trade, irrespective of affiliation, organized or unorganized. We have begun to organize unemployed councils that are formally independent, and to use flexible methods.

For instance, when we try to organize the unemployed on Sixth Avenue against the gyp agencies, this is a specific problem. It is different from the problem on the waterfront or in the day rooms of the building trades union, or the printers, etc., or where we have markets, like the needle trades.

Then also we have what is called white collar workers, who have their own illusions about dignity, etc. They don't like the name unemployed council, and they like to call themselves Unemployed Association. What is wrong with it?

You have got to take into consideration the ideology and habits of these workers when we organize and not to try to command that they should organize just as we prescribe.

**ONE** more point on the question of organization. This resolution proposes the establishment of a distinct apparatus for the activities amongst the unemployed. This must not be done as in the past when we often elected a committee that arranged a meeting, issued a leaflet, and that was the end of it, but we must assign, from experienced forces in the T.U.U.L. unions and oppositions, comrades who will consider this to be their union work.

I know that some of these things have been decided in resolutions, but nobody worried how they are to maintain themselves, how they are to live, and where they are to eat, because there is a difference between one who gives all his time to organize and one who looks for a job. Very often the active workers who have had experience, were not given the same consideration as the union functionaries.

A part of this entire proposition must be that we must provide for those comrades active in unemployed work, even as far as collecting food, establishing food stations, etc. We must have a core of workers active in the unemployed field. We cannot establish systematic work in this line without solving that problem.