

Past Militancy of American Workers

By ARNE SWABECK

Looking upon the present backward stage of the American labor union movement it is hard to conceive of its militant past. It would seem like the future historians, in describing the struggles for the establishment of a Workers' Republic should be compelled to point to it as the great stumbling block which tried to hold down the barriers and forever stem the tide of progress. Yet the organized workers are slowly approaching the position of nearly forty years ago. The sentiment for fighting up-to-date unions and independent political action through a genuine Labor Party is rapidly becoming crystallized into a definite demand. Soon the corner will be turned where old futile policies are discarded and a new era of healthy vigorous life is ushered in.

When immediately after the great industrial depression in 1884-85, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, forerunner to the present American Federation of Labor assumed the leadership in a national movement for the eight-hour day beginning May First 1886, and secured the co-operation of the Knights of Labor, the American trade unions definitely took their place in the front ranks of the international labor movement. This became the first application of the general strike on a large scale. A 340,000 organized workers took direct part and so powerful was this movement that the Chicago meat packers hurriedly granted the shorter workday to their workers without the need of the latter resorting to a strike. The unions gained tremendously in membership during that period. The Knights of Labor added about 600,000 to their ranks and the Trade Union Federation increased to about 250,000.

Likewise the attempts made by the workers to act politically as a class, however small the results, showed a keen understanding of the functions of trade unions. Compare this with the present disintegrating state of affairs where the unions are suffering terrible loss in membership where many locals throughout the country in various industries have been shot to pieces, while many of the gains of the hard struggles of the past have been taken away and the ever aggressive Enemy, despite the temporary lull in the battle, is advancing to completely exterminate unionism. The insolent attitude of the various law making bodies and the use of political institutions, controlled by capitalism, directly against the workers to abolish their so-called bill of rights and bring them firmly under the control of the iron heel, only goes further to show the present stage of degradation caused by a bankrupt bureaucracy which refuses to keep step with progress.

The militancy of the American workers during the eighties brought power to them. Power was the only thing capitalism respected at that time. Power is the only thing capitalism respects today. The workers' organized power secured the eight-hour day. The loss of organized power is responsible for the defeats suffered. The organized power of capitalism is dealing blow after blow to the workers. Too long it has been allowed to go unchallenged. Too long the workers have permitted themselves to remain isolated in their impotent craft organizations and become a prey for capitalist politicians. A way has been pointed out through amalgamation of the existing trade unions and independent political action of the workers through a Labor Party. It remains only for the workers to line up and bring it into actual life. A Labor Party means organized power to the workers. It will mark the beginning of the end of the "open shop" campaign, the misery caused by long hours and low wages, and the beginning of the end of capitalist exploitation.