The Ladies Garment Workers Awaken

By Wm. Z. Foster

The time was, a number of years ago, when the needle trades unions were in the vanguard of the trade union movement of the United States. They really stood for the improvement of actual conditions, for the power of the American Federation of Labor they were to be found in the hot blue of organizations lined up against the reactionary Gompers' machine. They were an avowed anti-Gompers, and he was never more happy than when attacking them viciously.

But such a situation is now merely a matter of history. The leadership of the needle trades unions, which one at least partially reflected the revolutionary spirit of the rank and file, has now become practically indistinguishable from the leadership of other trade unions. Officially the needle unions stand for few or no policies in advance of those of the bulk of organized labor. They have repudiated every semblance of opposition towards the employers, and they are just as ardent advocates of class collaboration as are the most hidebound A. F. of L. organizations.

They have thrown overboard autonomism and now stand squarely for craft unionism, having repudiated the campaign for industrial unions which they carried on in the A. F. of L. for many years. When Sigman, President of the International Ladies Garment Workers, presented Samuel Gompers with a bouquet at the recent convention of the A. F. of L., his act was symbolic of the complete surrender made by Sigman and other needle trades bureaucrats to the policies and leadership of such men as Gompers.

The complete degeneration of the leadership of the needle trades unions has kept pace with the decay of the Socialist Party, to which most of these leaders are or were affiliated. When the S. P. lost the left wing in 1919 it lost practically all its vital elements. The organization rapidly deteriorated, in large part, because of two peas in a pod, and their mad scramble for control is now raging as the Hillman machine moves towards the right. In this organization, the development of the rank and file front is somewhat slower because of the gesture to the left which has wrought havoc with the wages and working conditions of the needle workers. These workers have not been lost. These workers have not need not be repeated. The spontaneous outpouring of thousands of members in New York have demonstrated their opposition to the growing corruption and reaction among the needle trades leadership by overthrowing Kaufman's machine in the Joint Board of New York and electing the militant left-wing, Golda, as the head of this Board which forms the backbone of the whole organization. In the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, their revolt is developing as the Hillman machine moves towards the right. In this organization the development of the rank and file front is in somewhat slower because of the gesture to the right which has wrought havoc with the wages and working conditions of the needle workers.

Sigman's War Against the Left Wing.

It is characteristic of the right-wing program of betrayal trade union bureaucrats have in many other unions raised the charge that the Workers' Party and the Trade Union Educational League have been, in the first case in opposition to trade unionism generally, and in the second place a dual union, and upon the basis of such charges they have either expelled members outright from the union or have deprived them of their rights to sit as delegates in Central Labor Councils. But in no case was there such flimsy pretext asserted as in the case of those suspended executive officials. Once again, even as he did in the case of beginning Sigman's War Against the Left Wing.

The rapid swing of the needle trades leadership to the right, which has taken place during the past few years and which has now resulted in the retention of the leadership of the Hillman machine by capturing the three big local unions, Nos. 9, 2, and 22, and arbitrarily removing their executive boards. Once again, even as he did in the case of beginning the Hillman machinations at the left wing. They thought they saw their opportunity in this situation, with the rank and file in every union that the reactionaries seek to cover up and hide behind the sheep-like timidity that is to be found among the workers, to protest against the insufferable policies of Sigman & Co., the raids of the administration gangsters to capture against betrayal by their leaders and to organize themselves to defend their interests, the farcical trial staged by the Sigman administration in a desperate effort to discredit the leaders of the left wing and to find some faint plausibility for their campaign for jobs and control going on now among the reactionary needle trades leadership than in any other set of unions in the United States.

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The story of this revolt, one of the most spectacular and significant in the history of the American labor movement, need not be repeated. The spontaneous outpouring of thousands of members in New York have demonstrated their opposition to the growing corruption and reaction among the needle trades leadership by overthrowing Kaufman's machine in the Joint Board of New York and electing the militant left-wing, Golda, as the head of this Board which forms the backbone of the whole organization. In the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, their revolt is developing as the Hillman machine moves towards the right. In this organization the development of the rank and file front is somewhat slower because of the gesture to the left which has wrought havoc with the wages and working conditions of the needle workers.

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dictatorialism which were widely reported in the public press and conveyed the false impression that the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union and its locals were committed to the aims and methods of Communism and were thus unsuited to maintain the standing, reputation, and usefulness of the organization.

The officials of Locals 2 and 9 were similarly charged, with the exception that Locals 22 had committed the additional “crime” of financing the meeting. The fact that Communists have spoken at hundreds of meetings of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, and have been officially invited to speak at the conventions of that organization, and that these things were done for years with the knowledge that if not the willing consent of the officials, were conveniently ignored by Sigman in his eagerness to set up a “red scare” in his organization and thus to break up the growing opposition to his control and policies.

Movement Far-Reaching.

But the workers are not deceived by this maneuver. Their grievances are too deep and burning and their intelligence too well developed to allow this dragging of the herring across the trail to be successful. They refuse to be stampeded into a “red” hunt. They understand that the men and women being victimized in this latest maneuver of Sigman’s are the ones who have led the battle for their demands. They know that insinuations upon these demands, insinuations of which the union follows a fighting policy, is the real reason for the expulsion of these militants. Ample demonstration of this fact is the loyal manner in which the masses have rallied to the defense of those driven out of the union.

The movement now agitating the needle workers in the Ladies’ Garment Industry is bound to produce profound changes in the present weak and demoralized craft unions in the needle trades. Every six months the general meeting elects a Factory Committee. At present Ivan Ivanovitch Sishkin is the chairman of the committee.

Born in 1887, the son of a Russian whose perfect ease does not betray the harsh and strenuous deeds he has suffered through. It is by men like Shishkin that Russia is now governed.

Contemporary

When first we read about the factory premises lead us to the office of the Factory Committee. In this particular factory the Committee occupies two rooms in a low building which has all the earmarks of a manufacturing plant of the early nineties. It was built with a view to make the building useable as a workshop. The rooms do not correspond to any of the existing revolutionary parties. His protest against the landlord. A successful strike for higher wages foretells a fundamental change in the situation. The consequence is that the organizations are unable to maintain their leaders should make the mistake or minimizing the importance of the economic demands of the workers and to concentrate the fire of the mass unions organized on a shop committee basis. They will insist that the present union is one of dual unionism. The bureaucrats will split the unions if they think that thereby they can get rid of the natural resentment of the rank and file at the persecutions and betrayals of the Sigman bureaucracy, and by the insistence that the union follow a fighting policy, is the real reason for the expulsion of these militants.

The general meetings of all the workers take place twice a month. At those meetings where the workers personally state their opinions and formulate their demands, decisions are taken on many of the most vital problems of factory life. Every six months the general meeting is organized on a shop committee basis. They will insist that the unions embark upon an active campaign to build a mass rank and file union.