The Furriers Strike—A Victory for the 40-Hour Week

The Left Wing from Opposition to Leadership

By Ben Gitlow

The New York Fur Workers’ Union was the first union in the United States to make any important inroads into the leadership of the Communists and of the Left Wing. This union has approximately 13,000 members. The New York union holds in the International Fur Workers’ Union of North America and Canada. It is the financial backbone of the International and comprises over 75% of its membership. The International, however, is not controlled by the Left Wing. At the last convention of the Congress, who were the allies of the Left Wing, broke away and united with the reactionary Socialists and the transitives and gained control of the organization. The International Fur Workers’ Union is therefore in the hands of the right wing machine that still maintains its hegemony over the majority of needle trade unions.

The Original Demands of the Furriers.

Early in January the New York Furriers’ Union presented the following demands to the manufacturers:

1. Forty-hour, five-day week.
2. Thirty-two-hour week during the slack periods.
3. Equal division of work throughout the year.
4. Unemployment insurance fund to be raised by contributions from the manufacturers at the rate of 3½% of wage, paid distribution of the fund to be completely in the hands of the union, with the manufacturers to be punished for failing to obey the agreement.
5. A twenty-five cent per cent increase in wages over the present minimum scales.
6. All salaries to be determined on the union label.
7. Foremen must not be permitted to work in the shops on skins.
8. There to be inspected by the representatives of the union.

The Manufacturers Reject the Demands.

The demands were rejected by the manufacturers who are divided into three wing. The Associated Fur Manufacturers, Inc., The Associated Fur Manufacturers, Inc., represents the big dominating manufacturers, those financially most powerful. This association succeeded in uniting all the others in a common struggle against the workers. The bosses followed up their rejection of the workers’ demands by declaring a lockout of the workers employed in the shops of the Associated Fur Manufacturers, Inc. This was answered by the union with a strike of all the 12,000 workers employed in the shops of the three associations.

The United Front of the Right Wing and the Left.

The strike which was fought out most bitterly and lasted 17 long weeks would have been settled much sooner had the manufacturers not depended upon the two factors: first, the weakness of the workers; second, upon the weakness of the Left. All of the workers were employed in an industry that produces 80 to 85% of all the fur garments manufactured in the United States. This accounts for the position the New York union holds in the International Fur Workers’ Union of North America and Canada. It is the financial backbone of the International and comprises over 75% of its membership. The International, however, is not controlled by the Left Wing. At the last convention of the Congress, who were the allies of the Left Wing, broke away and united with the reactionary Socialists and the transitives and gained control of the organization. The International Fur Workers’ Union is therefore in the hands of the right wing machine that still maintains its hegemony over the majority of needle trade unions.

The Forces of the Workers.

Against this formidable united front of the bosses the union had to depend first upon its own forces, their determination and militancy, and second upon the support of all honest working class elements in support of the strike. The Furriers’ Union did not take a sectarian position in the face of this formidable opposition. To have done so would have resulted in certain defeat. The Furriers’ Union insisted that it was part of the recognized labor movement of the United States: the American Federation of Labor. The union answered the charge that it was not part of the labor movement by getting the Central Trades and Labor Council to officially endorse the strike. All elements of the political view that the strike was being engineered by the bosses, the union had to depend first upon its own forces, their determination and militancy, and second, upon a united front of all honest working class elements in support of the strike. All of the workers were employed in an industry that produces 80 to 85% of all the fur garments manufactured in the United States. This accounts for the position the New York union holds in the International Fur Workers’ Union of North America and Canada. It is the financial backbone of the International and comprises over 75% of its membership. The International, however, is not controlled by the Left Wing. At the last convention of the Congress, who were the allies of the Left Wing, broke away and united with the reactionary Socialists and the transitives and gained control of the organization. The International Fur Workers’ Union is therefore in the hands of the right wing machine that still maintains its hegemony over the majority of needle trade unions.

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The Right Wing, however, who minimized the importance of the leadership, deprecated the quarrels which they termed pernicious for the union and in general spread pessimism. The old leaders had rendered service and made sacrifices for the union, and it would be unwise to change them.

The Socialist Party repudiated this nefarious proposal and condemned the Right Wing. The Right Wing must fight as a united force for the endorsement of the schemes of the Communist Party. The Right Wing must fight as a united force for the endorsement of the schemes of the Communist Party.

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