The Needle, Shoe and Leather, Textile, and Eastern District Conferences

By Wm. Z. Foster

WHEN the Needle Trades Section of the T. U. E. L. met in national conference in New York City, May 5-6, it was the first time in American labor history that the rank and file elements of all the trades in this industry came together to consider their problems upon an industrial basis. Every important needle trade center in the United States and Canada was represented; likewise every trade in the industry except the United Garment Workers. Some ninety delegates were in attendance, coming almost entirely from local leagues. Had the representation been based upon local unions a conference three or four times as large could have been had.

From beginning to end the conference was crowded with work. Little time was wasted in useless argument or bickering. Phil. Aronberg of Chicago was chairman. The conference opened by hearing a series of reports. Joseph Manley, Eastern District organizer of the League, reported on the formation of the National Needle Trades Section and the calling of the conference. Secretary Foster outlined the national situation generally, and urged that amalgamation be pushed through to victory in the near future. After him came Ida Rothstein who reported on her recent organizing trip for the National Needle Trades Committee. She told of conditions as she found them in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Louisville, Indianapolis, Chicago, Cleveland, Buffalo, Toronto, Rochester, Montreal, Boston, and New York. She stated that practically the entire industry outside of New York is strong for amalgamation and that everywhere the left wing is growing in power and organization. Then Joseph Zack, Secretary of the Needle Trades Section reported in detail on the condition of the unions, the state of the industry, and the growth of the left wing movement among the needle trades. He outlined a program of militant action to solve the growing problems of organizing the unorganized, the piece-work, contractor, and standard of production systems, the growth of "open shop" sentiment among the employers, etc.

Finally Rose Wortis, delegate of the T. U. E. L. to the 2nd Congress of the Red International of Labor Unions, reported on the action of that body. She told particular stress upon the two great international problems of securing a united front on the industrial field, as against the disruptive tactics of the Amsterdamers, and the establishing of such relation with the Communist International as would bring all revolutionary elements into the Red International. She emphasized the need of a militant international of clothing workers throughout the world.

The conference transacted a vast mass of business covering a wide range of subjects. An elaborate organization thesis was adopted providing detailed plans to organize the local needle trades unions, care being exercised to follow the natural groupings and tendencies of the unions themselves. The Freiheit, New York daily labor paper, was endorsed and its stand in the recent slugging cases in the Furriers' Union was commended. A rousing endorsement was given the Russian revolution. Support was given to efforts of the Russian unions to secure admission to the various international federations of the respective industries. The conference voted to affiliate to the International Clothing Workers Propaganda Committee of the R. I. L. U., and to send a greeting to the revolutionary needle trades workers of the world. All needle trades local unions were urged to become affiliated with their local central labor councils and to become active in them. The famous "Chicago resolution" on amalgamation of all the craft unions into industrial organizations was adopted unanimously. Independent working class political action was endorsed and all militants urged to have their locals and internationals represented at the July 3rd conference called by the Farmer-Labor Party. The Friends of Soviet Russia, the Labor Defense Council, and the Russian-American Industrial Corporation were all supported. The general needle trades program adopted at the first national conference of the T. U. E. L. was re-
affirmed after making slight changes. Plans were laid to put on a big campaign to get readers for the June, 1923, issue of the Sustaining Fund of the League. Efforts will also be made to raise at least $10,000, through entertainments, donations, etc., to carry on the work of the Needle Trades Section as well as possible a bulletin to the unorganized. This bulletin will be published in several languages. During the coming year plans will be prosecuted to complete a system of shop delegate organization and to publish the rank and file of all unions. A program of action was adopted offering practical advice for working among the masses. It follows in part:

We should appeal to workers who accept our program in whole or in part and regardless of their political views. We must guard, however, against using anti-administration men and similar likers. Such elements are a discredit to the League. The character of our members must be irreproachable as judged by our conceptions of loyal unionists.

Our campaigns in the unions must be based upon real concrete issues which effect the interests of the workers in their daily struggle. The criticism of union officials and policies must always be a constructive nature. We should stress issues rather than personality.

We should not criticize and foster mistrust against paid officials just because they are officials. Such criticism is definitely ruinous for some of our best union members to accept positions as paid officials, thus permitting some job-hunters to manage and control the affairs of the unions.

We must always strike to bring our views before the masses. It follows in part:

The conference was in favor of a definite stand against the Cap Makers' plan for a Needle Trades Alliance, soon to be acted upon by the various organizations. It was denounced as a cheap substitute for amalgamation and about on a par with the band of federation advocated by Commers as far back as 1910. It could in no way serve the purposes of needle workers. The inconsistency was pointed out of needle union leaders who pose as revolutionists, voting for years in A. F. of L. conventions in support of S. F. resolutions for industrial unionism, the war prisoners in Michigan, California, Massachusetts, etc. The LABOR HERALD was heartily endorsed, and the conference of the unions to pass upon that plan was referred back to the conventions of the several unions for final decision.

In conclusion the conference protested against the attitude of the United Shoe Workers at the Cap Makers' convention and sent a demand that the writer be given the floor to reply to the anti-revolutionary—a demand that was refused.

The conference was selected to head the Needle Trades Section for the coming year, consisting of 20 members, 11 from New York and 9 from outside points. Joseph Zuck was elected Secretary later by this committee. Thus came to an end the long and difficult task of the needle trades revolutionaries. Even the pessimists and knucklers had to admit that the gathering was a great success. It laid the foundation for a movement to head the Needle Trades Section, involving a militant union of all needle workers, manned by real fighters, and affiliated to the Red International of Labor Unions.

The conference also condemned the action of President Bryant of the United Shoe Workers' International Union, who was accused of having sent out excited letters all over the country trashing the work of the amalgamators.

Various delegates explained the difference between the methods of the Committee to bring about amalgamation and those used in the late ill-fated effort. One vital difference is that the International Committee deems amalgamation not as a policy of officials but of the rank and file. Its aim is to thoroughly acquaint the membership with the principles involved and then to solidly organize them to make their will prevail. With this foundation laid, they can force their officials to come to a more understanding of all selfish quarrels over jobs in the organization. Another important point is that the International Committee proposes to organize all the independent unions, not the A. F. of L. unions as well.

But the big issue of this conference, like that of all the others, was amalgamation. The reports of delegates showed that no industry needs amalgamation more than the shoe and leather workers. They are split into at least twenty separate organizations, all warring against each other. Brother Michael Berry, Secretary of the Amalgamated Shoe Workers, outlined the efforts that have been made recently to consolidate all the independent unions. This movement started out most promisingly, joint conventions of many organizations, following plans of amalgamation drawn up. But the weakness of the movement was that it was largely one of officials; the rural and files being little posted. The result was that when the amalgamation movement did not go to suit some of these officials, who were eager to guard their own personal interests, they quarreled, court litigation, and even union scabbery ensued, making a bad situation even worse. Del. Berry had a pocketful of court papers of one kind or another that had been used in the past in all efforts at bringing about amalgamation.

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THE TEXTILE CONFERENCE

Inasmuch as the amalgamationists are just beginning work in the textile industry, the first national conference of the textile militants, held in New York, May 6th, demonstrated beyond question that militant organization is proceeding rapidly throughout the big industrial centers of the East. There were present 160 delegates from 17 states, ranging from Montreal to Washington and from New York to Pittsburgh. Nearly all important unions, industries, and districts were represented. Representation was based upon local leagues. Enthusiasm was rife among the delegates.

The conference of the Eastern District of the Trade Union Educational League, held in New York, May 6th, demonstrated beyond question that militant organization is proceeding rapidly throughout the big industrial centers of the East. There were present 160 delegates from 17 states, ranging from Montreal to Washington and from New York to Pittsburgh. Nearly all important unions, industries, and districts were represented. Representation was based upon local leagues. Enthusiasm was rife among the delegates.

Tim Buck, of Toronto, made a splendid report on the progress of revolutionary activities in Canada, showing how whole sections of the movement in that country are declaring for the most important unions in the textile industry, including the United Textile Workers, Amalgamated Textile Workers, American Federation of Textile Operatives, and the Amalgamated Silk Workers. The conference discussed the chaotic situation in the industry, the building up of national organizations, and the importance of plain, direct, bold statements of Communist principles.

The conference in Chicago in July and various other conventions, the conference occupied itself principally with the question of amalgamation. It adopted a resolution calling for amalgamation of the craft unions generally throughout the whole labor movement, and also the specific plan of consolidation for the textile unions as presented by the International Amalgamation Committee in that industry. The situation in the textile industry is just about as complicated as in the shoe and leather industry, with all sorts of industries operating in conflict with each other and the great mass of workers entirely unorganized. The conference discussed the chaotic situation in detail, devising practical methods of amalgamation and feasible plans to bring the individual unions together.

A campaign was outlined and an International Committee, headed by Albert Fleischer of New York, was set up to push it through. Local such committees will be set up in all textile centers, consisting of militants of all unions and all trades. Before long the Textile Amalgamation Committee will be in a position to straighten out the affairs of textile workers and in organizing this tremendous industry employing over 1,000,000 wage slaves.

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