A Tale of Two Cities

By J. B. Salatsky

The Conventions of the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union and of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America in Cleveland and Chicago.

History in the making, is of no significance whatever in its living connection with what had preceded it. Accidents devoid of much meaning. The knowledge of facts outside of their historical soil is absolutely destroyed.

Minister Schlesinger, of the I. L. G. W. U., is a dyed-in-the-wool revolutionary, and Sidney Hillman, of the A. C. W. of A., is an accomplished conservative revolution, what then? How much more do we then know?

Opposition in Both Conventions Rather Weak

Only eight hours of travel divide Chicago from Cleveland, the seats of the two conventions, yet measured in units of political and spiritual advancement, as evidenced in the two needle industry conventions, it would seem there is a quarter of a century of distance between the two cities. That much may be readily admitted if judgment shall be based on appearances. But is it right to do so? Does judgment by appearance lead us anywhere? Hardly, as a matter of truth.

But let us have a glance at facts.

The convention of the I. L. G. W. U. ran under the sign of fight on the left wing. In the convention of the A. C. W. of A. the left wing felt quite at home. As one onlooker termed it, the opposition was extremely anxious not to embarrass the administration, otherwise it was rather comfortable. It would be interesting, then, to discern the objectives of the opposition or the left wing in either case. And this is not at all easy to do, as it was shown in an article in the preceding issue of THE LABOR HERALD. The opposition in the needle industry is not homogeneous, it is in the making as yet and it lacks both in clarity of vision and in oneness of purpose.

And, it may be added, it also lacks most badly in training.

Some Objectives of the Left Wing

However, as in much as a liberal allowance for the newness of the situation permits, the following may be considered the program of the most receptive-conscious element of the opposition or left wing in the needle unions:

1. The democratization of the organization structure by means of introducing shop representation.

2. The consolidation of all needle unions into one concentrated fighting body.

3. Lining up with the aggressive world body of labor unions (the Moscow or Red Council of Labor Unions).

How the Conventions Differed on the Large Issues

Of these issues the two conventions took a stand which was in opposition to the convention of the A. C. W. of A. empowered the incoming administration to change the organic law of the union, wherever the demand for it will make itself felt. And it was decided in the general office in favor of a change in the structure of the organization that would bring the shop as a unit nearer to active participation in the government of the union.

Again, on the issue of consolidation of the unions in the needle industry, the stand of the Amalgamated was decided. The A. C. W. of A. is for one centralized union in the needle industry and opposed to a loose federation of the needle trades, which is sponsored by the I. L. G. W. U. But there is a reason of this kind necessarily a step toward consolidation in the near future may be questioned, since it is known that the International (the I. L. G. W. U.) is determined opposed to such consolidation.

Now, on the point of international affiliation, the reports were rather misleading, in so far as the Chicago convention of the A. C. W. of A. as concerned. While the press had it that "the left wing met with crushing defeat on the issue of international affiliation," the following is the truth in the case. There were introduced a number of resolutions advocating affiliation with the Moscow Council of Trade Unions. These resolutions came from locals and the delegates stood in support of their mandate of election to have these resolutions brought before the convention.

However, in the convention resolution No. 67 evolved and it met with the unanimous approval of the convention. It also was favorable by the administration and it was carried unanimously. None of the other resolutions favoring international affiliation had any support or votes. It inevitably would follow there would be no "crushing defeat" under the circumstances, and there was none.

Representations were made:

Whereas, the whole tendency of modern times is toward the international co-ordination of all departments and enterprises, whether they be of labor or capital;

Whereas, There are times of monstrous combinations of capital, over-reaching all national boundaries, engaged in sinister attempts to defeat and crush the movement both within, each nation and on an international scale; and

Whereas, A well-defined movement to defend the sacred cause of labor by co-ordinating our industrial organizations on an equally broad international scale is shown in the communications to the Amsterdam Trade Union International from the Moscow International of Labor Unions, inviting the former to participate in the formation of a United Front of all the labor organizations of the world, and the heartiest co-operation in the fight against organized capital.

Adopted.

Only those who are intentionally blind could discover a defeat for the position of the left in the adoption of the above resolution. But it is an old maxim that with so many wishes is the father to the thought.

The I. L. G. W. U., whose defenders—right or wrong—talk a great deal of unity, would not stand for an "unbiblical nonsense," even be it a genuine effort to bring about unity of all labor.

If the actions on the just enumerated three cases were but partial samples of judgment there would be reasonable ground for the notion that the I. L. G. W. U. turned reactionary and the A. C. W. of A. has gone decidedly right in those convention days. But is it really so?

Why the Difference in Attitude

One cannot escape facing the following question, and the question is to be answered if we are to understand what’s left.

The question is—What is really responsible for the difference in attitude taken by the A. C. W. of A. and the I. L. G. W. U. on a number of points of great significance? Was it due to a difference in leadership or was a difference in position of membership responsible for the difference in attitude? Or—perhaps there was really no such great difference at all in the attitude of these two organizations?

As a matter of fact, some ten years ago, one would find an exactly reversed situation with regard to the organizations under consideration. The I. L. G. W. U. was then the one radical organization, and the United Garment Workers of America, the parent body of the present Amalgamated, was reactionary. Since then the leadership of the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union has changed and in so far as the personnel is concerned the change was rather toward the more progressive type.

And the split that has taken place in the United
Garment Workers of America and caused the growth of the Amalgamated was not a split along lines of radicalism, or industrialism, or internationalism, only questions of autonomy and leadership were involved in that controversy, whereas in the other case, the administration appeared to have put its side up to you in a workable form so you won't fail to understand clearly the point I wanted to make. Here it is:

You are an engineer and probably understand an engine and what it will do better than I do. Now suppose you had a heavy train, say 2,000 tons, to move, and it was all ready and you were anxious to move that train to its destination in the least time and at the least cost; and suppose your future more or less depended upon your making a good showing on this particular trip.

You find it will take equal to a 160 ton engine to do the work, and you are told to select your power to make the run. Suppose you go over to the roundhouse and find that they have 16 engines of 10 tons each, and one engine of 160 tons, ready for the road. Would you take one engine of 10 tons and make 16 trips? Or would you take the 16 engines and make one trip, taking on 16 times and water 16 times, and calling 16 more tallow pots, and taking chances on 16 sets of machinery getting out of order and chances of all not starting together, or some being in reverse when you started, or maybe an engineer asleep on the job, or playing hookey to same steam?

Or would you take the 160 ton engine, where you had the whole power necessary concentrated in the one lever under your own hand? I ask you, as an intelligent engineer, which of the three would you do?

There can be no question at all about your answer. You would take the big engine. You would do the job in a workmanlike manner. Sure, you would.

Now the railroad workers have just this kind of a practical proposition before them at the present time, and they are trying to combat the railroads by using the 16 little engines, or Brotherhoods, against the companies who are using the biggest engine they have on hand, and who are trying hard to construct one still bigger by misusing the power of Government, if necessary, to whip us. You might not be able to get all the power out of the big engine, or general amalgamated union, at first, but you would soon be able to handle it and to get definite results. If we cannot combine all our organizations into one, as you seem to fear that we can't, then we must admit we haven't as much intelligence as the railroad companies have. If such is the case we are a bunch of incompetents and our cake is dished under any circumstances. Think it over, and look around your yards to see if you haven't got a railroad spy among you and the boys, suggesting the ideas you expressed the other night, because such ideas are in perfect accord with those that the companies wish you to hold. Perpetuating craft divisions amongst us fortifies the companies and makes them unbeatable. Amalgamation of our many unions into one is the only thing that will give us sufficient strength to defeat them. We must have a general railroad strike.

With kindest regards for yourself and all union men and the friends that assembled Saturday night, I am, as ever,

GEORGE