

Unemployment in the Auto Industry

By Barney Mass

Growing unemployment is indubitable and is not even officially denied by the executives of the auto industry. Paper reports estimate that the Ford Motor Co. lopped off 20 per cent of its entire payroll. Smaller plants of the Briggs Body Co. are practically at a standstill. Chrysler, Hudson and the Chevrolet Motor Cos. in Detroit have laid off considerable numbers of men. The Buick and Chevrolet plants in Flint are doing likewise.

The Michigan State Free Employment office and the official automobile agency on Howard and Cass are daily besieged by thousands of worker who return home disappointed. Private employment offices are rushed daily by several thousand workers looking for jobs. Every factory has unusually large lines which begin forming at three and four in the morning. The number hired is practically nil, only a few are needed to fill the customary turnover which has also reached a very low ebb.

The contributing factors in the present economic depression can be enumerated as follows: the disparity between the shrinking domestic market and the productive capacity of the auto industry; the growing competition in the foreign fields which is characterized by the purchase of huge foreign factories by American auto interests, and the transfer of production of the tractor to Ireland by the Ford Motor Co.; the constantly increasing seasonal slump.

Ford no longer enjoys the dominant position in the manufacture of cheaply priced cars. He is now sharing with the General Motors the leading position in this category. On their heels are the Essex, Whippet, etc. The respective organizations have reached unparalleled production records. The resale value of used cars has dropped to a level that is jeopardizing the new car market. Inducements to artificially expand the market through liberal allowances for old cars, fancy color schemes, light six-cylinder motors which Ford is now in the process of manufacturing, are only yielding temporary relief.

The present large output of autos and the increased production that must accompany the growing constant capital must be accomplished with less men, cheaper wages, improved methods in technique, and greater intensification of exploitation of labor power, in order to meet the keen competition for the narrowing domestic market. The Chrysler-Dodge merger preceded by the Graham Paige-Dodge alliance was the beginning of a series of trustifications that will be accelerated as the competition sharpens. The closer the saturation point of the market is approached the greater will the pressure be on the auto workers.

The relation of the domestic market to the foreign market, considering the productive capacity of the industry in the two spheres, dictates greater investments in European industry and complete rationalization of the home industry. Mr. Sloan, president of the General Motors, who returned from Europe two years ago after an extended trip, marked the advent of his organization's bid for the European market. Sorenson, of the Ford Motor Co., has just returned from Europe, having mobilized the forces of that company for the ensuing war. The shifting of operations closer to the European market will add to the contradictions of the home industry.

As a result of these tendencies, wage cuts, unemployment, longer hours, and a general worsening of conditions can be anticipated as a permanent situation which will become more incisive.

The Auto Workers' Union came into being and reached its fullest strength during the time when bodies were chiefly made from wood. This organization tended toward the workers engaged in this phase of the industry. The men employed on the chassis, gears, axles, etc., were ignored. The latter formed a majority of the workers in the industry. The machinists' local of the A. F. of L. took an interest only in tool and die makers and others of a skilled or semi-skilled nature. The unskilled machine hands were left to the mercy of the auto magnates—a position in which they still find themselves.

Only recently has this stratum of workers received some attention. Metal has supplanted wood, making necessary that the auto workers' union recruit these workers. The union lagged behind mechanical developments. The members of the machinists' union were instructed to withdraw from this union and join the A.W.U. Instead of concentrating in the two unions and working for a coordination of effort between them the result has been a small independent Auto Workers' Union with a few hundred members, mostly body workers, openly and mechanically controlled by the Party and a machinists' A. F. of L. local which at one time had a strong Left wing group but is now fully controlled by the reactionary clique and makes no pretense at trying to organize the auto workers. A few hundred skilled and semi-skilled workers comprise this local.

To rectify the past mistakes a shop committee movement must be launched which will unify all sincere elements and bring pressure on the weaker ones. Before spontaneous walkouts are permitted to develop into impotent strikes due to lack of organization and isolation, a foundation for a shop committee movement should be laid. Of course, in some concrete situations a decisive struggle cannot and should not be avoided. Departmental walkouts in some of the body plants have been seized upon by the Auto Workers Union and developed as sensational strikes in the press. Without realizing the next step, organization of the workers in

such circumstances was not preserved but they were exposed to being fired as a body. The strikes in the Buick plant at Flint, in the Fisher Body plants and even the recent one at the Murray Body only left behind a mess of bungling. In the latter experience there was manifest greater militancy than has heretofore been the case. The Murray Body Co. was working on the rush Four Door Sedan Model "A" Ford job and was in a precarious position. The workers were afforded a splendid opportunity but it slipped by through lack of proper organization. A verbal agreement which was made between representatives of the Union and the Company was ignored later by the latter.

The *Auto Worker*, the official organ of the Union, devotes most of its space to the body workers. It does not appeal to all the workers in the industry. The present condition of the industry offers an exceptional opportunity for factory meetings, extensive distribution of leaflets urging the workers to resist wage cuts, and general activity of this kind which will lay the base for a shop committee movement. No concerted effort has been made to distribute the *Auto Worker* at the Ford plants. After a lapse of several months of valuable time, the Auto Workers Union may hysterically awaken to the demands of the workers in this industry. All this reveals lack of policy and leadership.

There is a small group really interested in following a correct line. Dominated by Party politics, they are unable to resist the opportunism of the Party. There is no other expression in the Union since that organization reflects mechanically the internal strife in the Party. The mood of the masses of workers is maturing for organization and unless there is a change of policy, the union will find itself at the tail end of the campaign to organize the unorganized auto workers.

A Bad Habit

Although the reports on the situation in North Carolina published in the *Daily Worker* appear to be generally correct and give a good picture of what is taking place, it seems as though the tempting itch to fabricate news and give certain Party functionaries a bit of badly-needed and undeserved publicity cannot be resisted by the news office reporters. For example, a while ago the *Daily Worker* carried a long report on the funeral of Ella May Wiggins and extracts from a speech "made" by J. Louis Engdahl at the grave-side. We admit that Engdahl is far more in place at a funeral than at the head of the I.L.D., but it merely happens that Engdahl was never at or near the interment. The next time he speaks at a grave he should at least take the precaution of being present. Another story printed in the *Daily Worker* told of a big defense meeting held in Charlotte, and gave the number of workers in attendance, the names of the speakers and parts of their remarks. Again, it happens that although such a meeting was scheduled, it could not be held for lack of a hall and was not held as we learn from the *Gastonia Labor Defender*. In themselves these incidents may not be so catastrophic, except to indicate the bad habit the *Daily Worker* has of manufacturing news instead of printing it. The reader in Seattle or New York or Moscow will be impressed by these stories. But what impression will the Charlotte or Gastonia worker get of the *Daily Worker* as a whole, when he reads these reports and of his own experience knows them to be so much fantasy?

We Made A Little Mistake

In a previous issue we wrote: "At the Minnesota State Federation of Labor Convention at Mankato, only R. Votaw, member of the Communist League, was a delegate with no other Left winger present." Our Minneapolis comrades write to correct us a little. There was another "Left winger" present, a member of the Communist Party named Watts representing a Minneapolis local union. The bureaucrats made a motion to refuse a seat at the convention to comrade Votaw, the counter-revolutionary Trotskyist, on the grounds that he is a Communist. A militant co-delegate of Votaw's (representing the same local union of machinists) got up and spoke against the motion. Watts, with the New Line in one pocket and the Third Period in another, was so weighed down by discretion that he could not rise from his seat and failed to speak against the motion of the bureaucrats. We do not even know if Watts voted against the motion; if he did, it was done with splendid quietness. Nevertheless, we made a little mistake in the last issue. It seems that there was another "Left winger" present at Mankato...

A New Opposition Paper

We are glad to announce that the long hoped-for and long projected weekly organ of the French Opposition has finally made its appearance under the editorial direction of comrade Alfred Rosmer, one of the oldest militants in the French movement and a founder of the Communist International. The paper is called *La Verite* (Truth) and the first two issues we have thus far received are a splendid promise for the future. *La Verite* is not yet the organ of all the Opposition forces in France, which have been in a state of division and conflict for a number of years. But it is undoubtedly the first step of major importance towards the rallying of all the best elements in the French Communist movement for its regeneration, and we greet it as a mark of progress for the International Opposition. The forces of the Opposition in France, at present divided and unclarified, will receive a sharp impetus towards unification on a principle basis by this step. The issuance of a Weekly by our French comrades encourages us in our efforts to issue the *Militant* as a Weekly here. Those comrades interested in reading *La Verite* can get it at the subscription rate of 25 francs, sent "Cheque Postal: P. Frank - 136,855, Paris. The address of the paper is 45, Boulevard de la Villette, Paris, 10e.

The Clothing Strike in Minneapolis

By Carl Cowl

The needle trades strike in Minneapolis, embracing about 300 workers in the men's clothing industry is the largest manifestation of revolt against the miserable open shop conditions existing in this city for a number of years. The strike, called by Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, found fertile ground. Since the first shop struck 10 weeks ago, 4 other shops have followed suit. Four large shops must yet be called out. Workers in every industry of this city, long famed as a lush field for exploitation, are watching the outcome of the strike. The spreading and winning of the strike will give tremendous impetus and inspiration to the organization of the unorganized workers of Minneapolis.

A review of the handling of the strike to date will give us some conception of the forces in operation, and the direction in which the strike is going. If we are at all to understand the situation and give guidance to the workers, we must look at the facts as they are. The calling of the strike 10 weeks ago, in spite of the lack of preparation, resulted in the walkout of four of the smaller overcoat and leather shops. The workers, ready and willing to put up a militant fight for better conditions were held together by the promise of a general strike of the entire industry in Minneapolis. It seems that the words and deeds of the leadership of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America are at variance and sharply so. In the weeks that have elapsed since the calling of the strike, a marked reluctance to spread the strike on the part of the A. C. W. heads, Kaminsky, Genis, and Rosenbloom is apparent. They avoid the organization of the ladies' garment workers, furriers, etc., employed in the struck shops with the excuse that "We invite no jurisdictional disputes with the I. L. G. W. U., Furriers, Cloak-makers; we cannot go into their fields", and then they make no effort to get these other unions to act.

The agreement with the Excell shop signed three weeks ago above the heads of the workers, has created, along with the reactionary policy of the leadership, a very serious situation among the strikers. The agreement, undated, grants tentatively the more harmless demands of the union; the 44 hour week, pay for seven legal holidays, time and a half for overtime, recognition of the union. The vital question, that of piece-work rates, is left unsettled—the agreement specifies that the workers continue at the old rate till the other shops settle with the union. With the shortening of the work week, this results in a cut in wages.

What does this mean in actuality? What effect has this great "victory" on the morale of the strikers? The workers feel that the Excell Manufacturing Co. boss and not the workers is deriving the benefit of this agreement. They are putting out his work. He is obtaining new and large orders lost by the struck shops. Now he is using the agreement as a club over their heads when they demand a raise in the piece-rates. The strikers in the other shops feel that if the strike nets them a cut in wages, why fight for the union? On the other hand, in the eyes of Kaminsky, Genis, and Rosenbloom, the Excell Manufacturing Co., is a shining example to the bosses of Minneapolis that the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union is no danger to business, but rather, a benefit. Furthermore the Amalgamated Bank, in taking over Excell's notes foreclosed through the influence of the Citizens' Alliance, at the same time compels the union to supply "passive" workers without "labor trouble", or else risk losing the notes.

The puny-minded Stalinites, "stalwart leaders of the workers in fierce class battles" have found in the new "revolutionary" trade union line of the party a new excuse for deserting the workers in this strike. Under the false and non-Leninist slogan that all existing unions cannot serve the interests of the working class, they are capitalizing this situation to demonstrate that the old unions are fake unions, that the strike is a fake strike, that the only recourse for the workers is to abandon the old union, and join the new "mass" needle trades union (locally consisting of five members). The strikers are a thousand times more loyal to the strike than the Stalinites believe, and are bitter against the Party's leaflets denouncing the strike. They do not seek to abandon, but to win the strike. And finally, it is significant to note, the *Daily Worker* "fearless organ of the revolutionary masses", has not been able to find space to mention this strike—even in ridicule. With its present policy the Party is a nonentity in this strike situation.

The crying need at present is the organization and development of a militant Left wing group to fight the fight of the workers, broadening and deepening the strike into every field in the industry. Thru the initiative of the Communist League such a group has been formed. Pressure must be exerted in the strike for the demands of the workers for organization and better conditions. That pressure, to become effective, must be a result of the concerted and organized demand of the strikers themselves. The tasks which the Left wing must set itself and take responsibility for are heavy. Each militant step towards winning the strike will come from this group, determined to push forward the interests of the garment workers, in spite of a reactionary leadership and a cynically "disillusioned" Party, to victory. Our slogan is:

"FOR A HUNDRED PERCENT ORGANIZED NEEDLE TRADES INDUSTRY! MAKE THE STRIKE GENERAL! INITIATE A GENERAL ORGANIZATION CAMPAIGN IN MINNEAPOLIS!"