

# Is the A. F. of L. Becoming Progressive?

In some respects the forty-ninth annual convention of the American Federation of Labor reflected the pressure of growing working class discontent and of developing economic conditions. But only to the extent of taking on a more pacifist face masking the same reactionary policies which become ever more hostile to working class militancy and progress. This is what the Socialist Party and the leading Musteites gloat over as the new born "progressivism" of the A. F. of L.

Characteristically, the convention sessions were held in the fashionable Royal York Hotel, non-union from top to bottom. (The rent of the convention hall alone cost \$60,000.) There was less heresy-hunting than usual because the Communist "menace" always paraded in the past before a frightened audience, has become with the present growing working class discontent, something to be dealt with in a more serious manner. Not that the audience changed. No, it was the same old diamond-glistening fat boys playing the master's game, even to the extent of heavy speculation on the stock market or on the curb. Perhaps many of them are now preoccupied in nursing burnt fingers received in the last stock crash.

## Lewis and Woll to the Rear

The two usually most militant spokesmen for capitalist policies, conceded to be the real wire pullers behind the baptist Green, secretly and openly the most adored ones of the payroll brigade, Mathew Woll and John L. Lewis, did not assume the commanding position witnessed at former convention since the death of the "immortal" Gompers. Lewis, in the past always the bellowing star red-baiter, did not perform. The frightful destruction wrought by him in his own union evidently made it unwise to bring him too much to the fore. Woll spoke in somewhat softened tones of how he had been misunderstood in the past, particularly with regards to old age pensions. As a matter of fact he claimed to have always been in favor of it. His connections with the Civic Federation, the high tariff lobby, the employers campaign for compulsory arbitration, etc., were considered perhaps a little too open. Some of them had incurred the displeasure of "progressive" capitalist politicians, liberals, Professor Dewey, yes, and even the Socialist Party.

Anyway the convention showed a change of face and of public front as required by present policies of the big employers and the capitalist government at Washington, D. C. It gave more than usual attention to the south because of the general capitalist fear of the establishment of unions there under left wing leadership. It went on record for old age pension laws to be enacted by the various states. It particularly utilized the stereotyped phrases of the capitalist press of a high standard of living for labor, keeping up consumption, and co-operation in maintaining prosperity. This to soothe the growing dissatisfaction of the workers while tying them more effectively to the murderous speed-up, semi-company union system.

Yet some of the convention actions also reflect the pressure of growing working class discontent and pressure from sharpening industrial conditions. The Executive Council report indicated the fear of growing technological unemployment as it calls it, meaning workers thrown upon the streets displaced by machines, and particularly the fear of rapid disappearance of trade skill in this machine age. Naturally, that would eliminate any last excuse for craft unionism and spells its final doom.

## The Scripps Editorial

Nothing, however, excited the delegates as much as an editorial on the failure of the A. F. of L. published by the Scripps-Howard chain of newspapers on the second day of the convention. The weight of its criticism hung like a pall over the gathering. Bluntly it projected the miserable career of the federation stating in part that it will have to report failure to make any gains in membership, being now below 3,000,000 as compared to 5,000,000 and more in 1920; failure to be a factor in the labor awakening in the south; with increasing technological unemployment, failure to obtain a government unemployment or old age pension system; the basic industries entirely unorganized and failure to devise a constructive program to prevent suffering in other industries, growth of the anti labor injunction evil; handcuffing the unions and helplessness to protect the rights of the workers. Then after citing that these things are happening in the most "prosperous" country, the most "enlightened democracy" and blaming both the country and the A. F. of L. for the workers' misery

## By Arne Swaback

and the failure to get "justice", the editorial queries:

"But after all what is the A. F. of L. for?..... The truth is the A. F. of L. is failing miserably in its stewardship. Every year its weakness is more apparent.

"The southern textile situation is a vivid example of that failure, but it is only one of many examples. For thirty years the A. F. of L. has ignored the field except for easy resolutions and a handful of organizers. The job has been left to the Communists. While the hungry southern mill hands are facing alone the organized employers and hostile authorities, beaten by mobs and shot down by sheriffs, the sleek A. F. of L. officials sit twiddling their thumbs at mahogany desks in Washington or are making patriotizing speeches to the National Security League or at West Point.

"The A. F. of L. is accurately described

as the aristocracy of labor. All aristocracies are subject to dry rot."

The Scripps Howard papers have a circulation of about fifteen million. The convention felt the lash and squirmed. An inquiry was made by Green whether this represents a set policy with an answer from the editor-in-chief that it was merely friendly criticism. And so it was. It meant in plain words:—Get busy; stop the rebellion now in the offing; try to lead the workers, or the Communists will do the job.

Perhaps on account of this a few extra speeches were made on the problem of organization of the south. McMahon, president of the United Textile Workers, eloquently described the radiant beauty of the southern mill villages, extolled the "splendid efforts" of the A. F. of L., made a slight remark on the low wages prevalent, but said nothing about the struggle—and,

## HOOVER'S BUILDING PLAN SWINDLE

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talist men of almost every known industry and trade, by bank presidents, electric power heads, railroad magnates, automobile barons, and others, to show what business has in mind to maintain "Business as usual", stagger the imagination, certainly those of a layman, and are meant to be impressive and conclusive. The figures run into billions of dollars that are to go for construction, new activities and increased production and maintenance and repairs in almost any sphere of production that one could name. The daily and other papers and magazines are filled each day with these astronomical figures and stupendous proposals that are to be. But their weakness is that the proof of security they are supposed to show are "too conclusive" in some respects. Even casual inspection of these gigantic figures or are supposed to, the immediate needs of a given industry or trade if there is not to be a collapse. Increased figures are meant for realization, but only in rare instances is there shown specifically how the particular job is to be accomplished: how many workers, at what wages, working hours, etc. The figures sound grand—but are hollow, so far certainly for that which they are supposed to portray.

The New York Times is hopeful of Hoover's schemes, but by no means certain. It says (12-1-29): "It will be some time (how much?) before the projected outlays by great corporations can be made concrete in actual employment. In every case preliminary studies will have to be made, blue-prints submitted and each detail worked out." (Is this "business as usual"?) Moreover, this mobility of labor is not in actual practice so facile as it is in economic theory, so that time must elapse before workers who may be displaced at one point can find jobs at another. Apparently Mr. Hoover himself contemplates some such slow (!) development of his plans."

Public construction, however wide the program, does not eliminate the features of the capitalist system that make for recurring crashes. True, governors, senators, businessmen, bankers, and also the A. F. of L. fakers may "co-operate". But that will not carry on production unless profit is produced; will not hire labor unless there is profit therein. The construction of public buildings, subways, houses, etc., are one way of applying Hoover's proposals. Yet, these forms of building construction have been on the decrease in 1929 and the total values less than in 1928. Hopes for 1930 may be high and good wishes of men expressed in conference but no substantial economist has yet stepped forward with figures to prove a better case for 1930. In the last analysis capitalists seek for the key to unlock the door to profit.

## The Public Works Panacea

Governments, national, states, local, may tax for public works. But it will not then be long before the hitherto "public-enlightened citizens" or capitalists will begin to squeal and will try to do business where their profits will not be affected so much by governmental and political exigencies.

Mr. Julius Klein, assistant Secretary of Commerce and the closest economic collaborator of Hoover may buoy up the spirits of the poverty and wealth-owning classes with his references to the general and dominating role of American capitalism in capitalist world economy.

He may further point out, that this expansion of American capitalism's influence on an international scale will be on the increase for a time, yet and that this factor will also be of aid domestically. But it is also necessary to point out that this increased aggressiveness of the United States increases the rivalries and difficulties with other nations; that ultimately and quickly these international economic and political rivalries produce national domestic discord—unemployment, rationalization methods, lower wages, increased and sharper class conflicts between the employers and the working class.

All the measure sponsored by Hoover, are only stop-gaps at the workers expense. Others of the enlightened capitalists and their political agents, such as Lieutenant Governor Lehmann and United States Senator Wagner of New York, sense even bigger crashes to come and add their bit in the hope also of "permanent capitalist stabilization".

The emergency brake may work, but each time it is tried again, it works less simply and easily. The working masses are slowly now, and more swiftly in the future, learning that though the roads, are here and there lined with trees and hot-dog stands, the road of capitalism leads over a cliff. They will clamber out, as many already have, and look for another route of socialism or communism. Hoover's "prosperity reserve" is being depleted.

## Organize To Fight!

The workers in the United States still have the task in the main to see the capitalist as their class enemy, to organize as a class to defeat the employers. Hoover's waning "prosperity reserve" can only be effectively answered by a new social system which substitutes social production and use for capitalist anarchy and misery. It can only be met now with a militant resistance to his enormous "construction program" swindle, a meaningless palliative for the growing unemployment among the workers, the prospect of heavy wage cuts, of speeding up the already intensive general attack on their standard of living exploited American working class, and ing. The Communists must lead in this task of education, organization and struggle.

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## THE NEXT ISSUE

Lack of space forces us to omit a great deal of important material. The next issue will contain a very timely article by comrade Trotsky on "Communism and Syndicalism," an opinion on the role of Communists in the trade unions. Very important for the Left wing in this country.

Workers will do well to subscribe now and not miss a single issue of the Militant which will be an intellectual treat for every worker besides being a guide to action.

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of course, nothing about the treasonable record of the U. T. W. leadership.

## The Convention and the South

The convention decision to map out plans to organize the South will not serve as an inspiration to the workers. Such convention braggadocio we have become used to. The results have done nothing but serve the employers to prevent organization. Yet today, the National Textile Workers Union has set an example of militant policies and organization in the South. Communist leadership, as far as the issues of the struggle are concerned, has found a response among the workers. The A. F. of L. leaders have been given a task by their masters, the employers, and they will undoubtedly endeavor to organize into "safe" channels to stem this developing tide of militancy.

The Executive Council report recommended the usual policy of "rewarding friends and punishing enemies" among capitalist politicians. As an "appropriate" answer to the appearance of Premier Mac Donald, still in his role as a "missionary of peace"—by the way, he was greeted with tumultuous applause—it evidently considered its high strung claims of "labor" control of Congress, set forth in the report as follows:

"The election of members to the House in 1928 resulted in the success of 135 representatives with 100 percent legislative records on measures of interest to labor. There were also 110 members elected whose records were exceedingly fair. It is not generally known, but it is a fact that 39 members of the United States Senate also have 100 per cent labor records.... Fifteen other Senators are considered most fair... It will be seen that a majority of the members of the House and the United States Senate, irrespective of politics, are friendly to labor". But, adds the report so as prevent any too great expectations, some of the leaders are powerful enough to prevent remedial measures from enactment.

On the serious problem of anti-labor injunctions the council emerged with a draft for a so-called injunction limitation bill. It represented a stupid effort to accomplish the impossible, namely to devise a bill that could be acceptable to capitalist lawyers and capitalist courts. The debate on this draft revealed a number of long winded "barristers" clashing over the technical intricacies of capitalist laws, practically obliterating all traces of a labor gathering.

## Furuseth Bursts Out

The chief performers were Andy Furuseth, Matthew Woll and Victor Olander. The head of the seamen's union, Andy Furuseth, as reactionary in outlook as any of them, got somewhat animated by the debate and shot a few well-aimed darts into the armor of the hidebound stand-patters. At one point, in answer to Woll he said: "Was it a pettyfogging lawyer taking the other side because his case was weak, who used just what he wanted and sopped the quotation where it would not do to continue, or was it possibly the president of the Civic Federation who was defending the equity power in injunctions and labor disputes?" At another point, referring to the convention held in Toronto twenty years ago with its lofty resolve pledging the delegates to go to jail in the fight against injunctions, he blazed forth: "But even the best of you will not. You will not fight." Then again, referring to the shame of Indianapolis—the submission of John L. Lewis to the Anderson injunction against the miners' strike—he related how one judge had exclaimed: "Oh, that miserable coward, that miserable coward!"

However, this time it all happened to fit in well with the slight change of face of this coterie of "labor leaders", who thus hope to serve their masters more effectively. Otherwise the high strung debate and the long, detailed draft of the "injunction limitation" bill amounted to exactly naught. Not the slightest leadership will be given by the A. F. of L. officials to fight the injunction system. For once Furuseth was right.

Naturally it would be entirely useless to expect any change in policies from this upper crust stifling the A. F. of L. This, however, does not in the least alter the fact that the Federation embraces masses of workers and represents today all there is of an organized character. Moreover, history has given ample proof that periods of depression with consequent increasing working class discontent and sharpening struggles will invariably witness substantial growth for unions, even under the most reactionary leadership. There are signs aplenty of such developments here. Yes, even in the South the A. F. of L. will undoubtedly yet become a factor. To the Left wing this should indicate clearly its tasks.