

The Depression and Labor

Prospects for the Approaching Struggles in the United States

By Arne Swaback

The American workers are now confronted with the prospect of an already advancing industrial depression. The questions of their preparations to meet it, the political development of the workers themselves, their degree of organization and their conception of the tactics to be employed, become vitally important. There need be no doubt about growing discontent and more severe struggles in the coming period.

That this is recognized by the capitalist class is most clearly evidenced in the increased anti-labor drive. It was demonstrated in the editorials carried by the Scripps-Howard Newspaper syndicate at the time of the American Federation of Labor convention at Toronto. The employers have become thoroughly alarmed at the appearance of Communists organizing, by militant methods, among a formerly backward but now awakening working class in the South. Hence they turn to the A. F. of L. officials demanding that they be the ones to organize and "lead". More recently it was shown in the Hoover "building conferences" in which A. F. of L. heads promised that there would be no movements for wage increases undertaken in the immediate future—that is, during the depression.

The Role of the A. F. of L.

This also indicates the role to be played and the perspectives of the A. F. of L. in the coming period. It is worth noting the most recent developments among the needle trades workers in the ladies garment and furriers sections, formerly largely under left wing influence. The A. F. of L. has actually succeeded in reestablishing its organization and "leadership". It has gained in co-operation with the employers, almost complete control of the jobs and membership dues payments. Among the New York food workers, where militants have lately been active in organization work, the A. F. of L. is now initiating an organizing campaign. The Toronto convention resolved to organize the South and the plans worked out are about to be put to test. The United Textile Workers union will have leadership and what it terms any form of spectacular mass drive is banned. Negroes will be organized on approval of "white locals" in the district, and—in separate locals.

Comments on the general organization policy to be pursued in this drive are quite superfluous as it is clearly indicated that there will be no departure from the general practice established by the A. F. of L. officials. Even among the hard boiled Bourbons of the South the main effort will be directed toward winning the bosses for co-operation with the labor "leaders" who have sufficiently proven their willingness to the greatest reciprocation in selling out the workers at the crucial moment. One question of the greatest importance, however, is whether or not the campaign will succeed in actually bringing the Southern textile workers into the U. T. W. The oft repeated statements of the *Daily Worker* that these workers, disgusted with the betrayals of the A. F. of L. in 1920-21 and recently, will never join its ranks are neither convincing nor true.

A comparison of events in the South, the frame-ups in Gastonia and the killings in Marion, clearly reveals that the Southern textile barons are set against any form of union or organization, whether led by Communists or by A. F. of L. officials. They will tolerate A. F. of L. "leadership" only so long as it is effective in helping to wipe out militant unions. Yet it would be idle to speculate on no results in the A. F. of L. organization drive. There are many reasons to assume that the Southern workers, driven by increasing speed-up pressure added to which there now appears the misery of unemployment, will respond and join, perhaps in large numbers, despite the sell-outs of the past. So much more so because the National Textile Workers union, under Communist Party direction, follows the usual method of practically abandoning a field when the opportunity for spectacular activities disappears. All recent history shows that during periods of industrial crisis workers flock to conservative unions. Nor is there anything horrible in this prospect when one remembers the development of the British trade unions from one of docile support of the capitalist empire to a situation where the

general strike could become a possibility in 1926. Now the process of developments proceed at a much more accelerated pace.

The Pressure of the Ranks

The prospects of growth of the A. F. of L. are not confined to the South. The developing industrial depression not only offers excellent opportunities for organization but is certain to throw large sections of the unorganized workers into the lap of the A. F. of L. Extended organization in this period will inevitably mean greater pressure from the ranks against the present wage cutting, speed-up campaign and for more persistent struggle to obtain the demands corresponding to their growing needs. If anyone doubts the probability of such struggles developing on the basis of A. F. of L. organization, or denies their probability, we might refer to such recent examples as the New Orleans street carmen's strike and the Marion textile workers' strike.

That this will not in the least mean any change of policy or outlook in the upper layer of the A. F. of L. bureaucracy is of course amply proven by all past experiences. On the contrary, the demands of their capitalist masters will increase correspondingly and their faithful service will be expressed in more co-operation with these masters and the state powers in the violent suppression and cunning betrayal of workers' struggles. Especially will they attempt to buttress their own dominance over working class ideology by efforts to exterminate Left wing unions and any form of organized Left wing sentiment.

Yet it is under such conditions that new opposition develops. The "progressive" movement, already emerging within the A. F. of L. since the Left wing practically abandoned that field, was a natural first expression. But it was stillborn. It appeared in the form of the Conference for Progressive Labor Action, dominated by the Socialist Party and, although having a progressive platform, it was based rather upon certain sections of the trade union officialdom than upon the main stream of organized workers. Hence, while being an outgrowth and expression of dissatisfaction with the official policies of the A. F. of L., it lacked the dynamic force for becoming a real opposition and its course of complete merger with the bureaucracy is pretty well decided unless pressure from below and from within forces it in a Leftward direction. To conceive of relying upon the "progressive" leaders to develop a real opposition would of course be folly. But the gap created among the workers by their leadership of a growing progressive sentiment—leading it backward—and that of the Left wing leading it forward, can most successfully be bridged by correct united front policies of the latter. In the recent period the exact opposite has been the case with the result of further isolation of the Left within the mass organizations and easier diverting of opposition sentiment into harmless channels. Nevertheless, such sentiment remains and is bound to grow. Its correct direction is still a task to be performed.

The present trends among workers are characteristic of what can be expected from the mature course of development. There is a restlessness over the prospect of employment with the ranks of the unemployed increasing. There is discontent with the growing speed-up exploitation, and here and there distinctly manifested readiness for struggle, with some instances of workers swinging toward the Left. These are some of the outstanding features. With a protracted severity of industrial depression it can easily lead to convulsions. But this does not mean that the working masses recognize the role of the A. F. of L. "leadership", of the so-called progressives, of the social democrats, or that they are ready for the leadership of the Communist Party. They are still far from it and several steps will yet have to be taken considerable experience will still have to be accumulated before the workers reach that point.

A False Assumption

It would be preposterous to assume that for instance the main body of the steel workers, actually enrolled into unions in the 1919 drive and then left in the lurch have learned a sufficient lesson to be able

to distinguish between leaderships. Even among the coal miners, where union official corruption and betrayal have yielded numerous bitter experiences, where the rank and file are far ahead of the workers in other industries in their readiness for struggle, the National Miners Union, under openly acknowledged Communist leadership, has thus far succeeded in enlisting the support of only a very small fraction (this, in large measure is also due to wrong policies which will be dealt with in separate articles).

Growing radicalization of the American workers, while likely to be accompanied by sporadic, unorganized struggles, essentially mean their turning more definitely toward union organization—mainly toward the existing mass unions without being able to comprehend the character of the A. F. of L. "leadership". A turn toward the building of a labor party is also likely. In one instance—the last New York City elections—the large increase in votes by the Socialist Party ticket, reaching a total of tens of thousands while that of the Communist Party ticket decreased to a little less than 6,000, is, despite the seeming paradox, an expression of radicalization in an American scale. Thousands of the workers who voted for the S. P. did so with the conviction of taking a step to-

ward the Left, away from capitalism and toward socialism, without being able as yet to understand the character of the S. P. leadership or the distance that the party has moved away from socialism. In that sense and to that degree they expressed their growing radicalism. There is no other basis upon which that vote increase can be evaluated. If these workers had wanted to remain ideologically as they were before—supporters of capitalism—they would naturally have continued to vote for the Republicans and Democrats. This and subsequent events also indicates that the S. P. and its social reformist leadership will change from its years of relative obscurity and paralysis, and become more of a factor misleading the workers. The course of working class radicalization in this course and the blunders of the official Communist party, gives it that opportunity. Nevertheless, the fact of the workers actually taking the first steps away from capitalist ideology and toward union organization is what holds out great hope and great possibilities for the revolutionary movement.

The problem of the new industrial unions will be considered in the next issue of *The Militant*.—A. S.

The St. Louis Unemployment Demonstration

ST. LOUIS—The march of 1500 unemployed workers to the local City Hall to present a set of demands to the Mayor was one of the best working class demonstrations that St. Louis has seen for a long time. The spirit of the workers and the readiness with which they responded to the call for the march is an indication of their temper and the severity with which the industrial depression has hit them.

St. Louis Hard Hit

St. Louis is one of the most heavily affected industrial centers. Industry is at a low point, and thousands of workers walk the streets desperately seeking any job at all that will offer them the barest possibility to live. The prospects for an industrial pick-up are far from bright here and instead of the ranks of the unemployed becoming thinner, they increase in number every day. A conservative estimate of the number now out of work in St. Louis is about sixty thousand workers.

In order to begin the mobilization of the employed and unemployed workers in the city for a fight to improve the frightful conditions of the jobless, the local branch of the Communist League of America (Opposition) together with the Workers Alliance of St. Louis, planned the organization of a workers' march on the City Hall, where demands for the unemployed might be presented and a public forum be established so that an appeal that would reach the ears of the whole working class of the city could be made.

Without the bombast and cheap sensationalism that usually accompany the "mass demonstrations" of the official party, the League and the Alliance made all the necessary preparations for the march. In an effort to make the movement inclusive of all the radical elements in the city, an appeal was made to the local branch of the Communist party to join in the work and help organize the unemployed. The reply of the Stalinists—represented by one of the travelling "organizers", D. T. Early—was that they would have nothing to do with the "counter-revolutionary Trotskists", particularly since they were "dead". The local Stalinists showed that all their words about the conditions of the unemployed workers could not be translated into action but would remain just so much talk.

Leaflets were issued by the Communist League and distributed among the unemployed workers who received them with enthusiasm. The demands proposed by the League included the following:

Demands Proposed

1. Complete insurance against unemployment to be provided by the government, giving all unemployed benefits of the full wage rates, without any exceptions or qualifications. The insurance to be financed by taxes on income, inheritance, and profits, and the administration of unemployment benefits to be in the hands of the workers, elected from the shops, and the organizations of the unemployed.
2. No evictions of the unemployed for non-payment of rent.
3. Emergency relief to be provided for the unemployed immediately, from city,

state and federal funds.

4. Full union wages on all public works, with the workers' right to organize and strike against discrimination and bad working conditions.

5. Abolition of private employment agencies; the establishment of free employment agencies, administered by workers' representatives.

6. Recognition of Soviet Russia, the only workers' and farmers' government in the world. This would alleviate employment through increased trade which Soviet Russia would place in the United States if relations were established.

7. Establishment of the seven-hour day and five-day week. No overtime work. Abolition of the speed-up system; 15 minute rest periods hourly, regulation of machine speed by the workers.

8. Immediate abolition of all "vagrancy" laws.

On the day of the demonstration, 1500 or more workers gathered at the appointed place and marched to the City Hall. The Mayor refused to see them. On the top steps of the City Hall, Elmer McMillan, leading St. Louis militant, read the demands of the Communist League and spoke in detail upon them. He was followed by Ralph Martin of the Alliance who spoke on the need for organizing the struggle against unemployment.

Cops Break up the Meeting

By this time, the Mayor had given his orders for dispersing the demonstration and a gang of cops and dicks sallied into the crowd. McMillan and Martin were arrested and taken to headquarters half a block away. The workers followed them, cheering and shouting for their release. After an hour of questioning by the cops the two militants were released.

As a result of the demonstration, thousands of workers throughout the city learned for the first time of an organized attempt being made to carry on a fight against the specter of unemployment. The secretary of the Communist League has been receiving numerous letters from workers throughout the city endorsing the movement and congratulating the League on its activity. A number of old time militants who had dropped out of the Communist movement some time ago have revived their interest and are turning toward the League particularly since the official party is doing nothing at all.

Plans are further being made for the continuation of the work in the form of protest meetings, the organization of Councils of Unemployed, and the formation of a broad united movement to combat the effects of unemployment on the workers.

This movement is meeting neither with approval of the St. Louis business men and their Mayor, Miller, or of the local A. F. of L. bureaucrats. For instance, Elmer McMillan is now up on charges before his local Painters Union for having participated in the demonstration. He is charged with being a member of a Communist organization. This is not the first time the reactionaries have tried to expel McMillan. A fight against these tactics is being organized