

The Mining Situation and the Tasks of the Left Wing

Statement of the National Committee of the Communist League of America (Opposition)

Three recent events have made it necessary to consider the situation in the mining industry and the tasks of the Left wing. They are: the heavy defeat suffered by the Left wing National Miners Union in the Illinois strike the call for an international anti-Lewis United Mine Workers convention, a call signed by the heads of the Illinois district together with John Brophy, Alexander Howat, August Dorchy, Dougherty, etc., etc.; and the call for a national convention of the National Miners Union itself.

None of the large trade unions in the country has been so heavily hit in the past five years as the United Mine Workers. The once powerful proletarian organization has been rent from stem to stern. One district after another has been mercilessly crushed by the Lewis machine controlling the union. Every progressive and Left wing member of the union has been subjected to the most brutal regime of expulsion and persecution, so that the backbone of the militant resistance to the ruinous course of the labor bureaucrats was broken. The vigorous offensive of the coal operators was countered by retreats all along the line, led by Lewis and Co. The extension of the industry into the non-union South—entirely unorganized to this day—was not followed at all by organizational action by the U. M. W. A. The union standards of the workers have been beaten down steadily by the operators who have had the scarcely concealed collaboration of the union officialdom; and aggravating this decline in living standards has been the festering sore of unemployment.

The coal operators have been gaining all along the line. They have not been met with any effective resistance. Working hand in hand with his capitalist employers, using the vilest methods of corruption, autocracy, black-jack rule, mass expulsions and the like, Lewis and his machine have bled the organization white. The U. M. W. of A. today has been stripped to the point where it exists—as a substantial organization—in only two districts: Illinois and the anthracite field. Under its present leadership it does not even make a pretense at fighting for the miners' interests. It keeps what is left in the union divided by sectional agreements; throttles all initiative; drives members out of the union with the poison gas of corruption and terrorism. Indeed, there is hardly another trade union in the country in which the complete bankruptcy and criminality of the leadership and collaborationist policies has been so conclusively demonstrated.

In the face of this utter bankruptcy of Lewisism and the repeatedly expressed opposition of the bulk of the miners to it (at conventions, in union elections) etc., and the excellent opportunities for progress thereby afforded the left wing movement, the latter has succeeded in making but little appreciable headway in the industry as a decisive organized force. On the contrary. The course it has pursued under the direction of the present Communist Party leadership has dealt it severe blows which, combined with the new developments in the situation, can prove fatal for its immediate future. To prevent such a development, the Left wing must soberly and objectively observe the newest events, absorb their significance and draw the proper conclusions. This has not yet been done.

1. The N. M. U. Strike in Illinois

The National Miners Union strike in Illinois bore most of the characteristic features of the present ruinous and adventurist course of the Party leadership which has been fastened to the new unions with a strangling grip. The strike was called with virtually no preparations made to carry it through successfully. The Belleville District conference, four weeks before the strike call was issued, was devoted mainly to a thoroughly framed-up polemic against the then national president of the union, John J. Watt, who disagreed with the Party policy of rigid, mechanical control. The strike was not mentioned there. The post conference attempts to discredit Watt among the miners, with the Party utilizing all the contemptible methods so common to the reactionary labor bureaucracy, only deepened

the distrust and antagonism among the miners. Instead of consolidating and extending the front of the N. M. U., in preparation for the strike, the Party leadership created a situation which narrowed the union basis down to the smallest minimum. The whole campaign of the N. M. U. in Illinois at that time, was conducted under the banner of the slogan that the principal enemies of the miners against whom the strike was to be directed were not the coal operators but...the "Trotskyists, the I. W. W., the Socialist Party and the S. L. P."

Irresponsibility, bombast and claims based solely on wishes, predominance of narrow factional interest, playing with the interests of the class—these were the outstanding characteristics of the Party leadership of the strike. The sub-district conferences held a week before the strike call was issued by the District Board, did not have the strike on the agenda. The N. M. U. leaders did not even take the trouble of circulating a strike vote among the miners which would have helped to draw broad masses into the struggle. The essential basis of the strike forces was among the unemployed miners and not among those at work. No serious attempt was made to agitate among the members of the United Mine Workers to join the struggle, and everything was done to make collaboration with the members of the I. W. W. in the coal fields impossible. In fact, every element in the situation that did not declare in advance its entire agreement with the political line of the Communist Party was deliberately repulsed. The Party (i. e., the National Miners Union) organizers, and their press (the *Daily Worker*, etc.) devoted more time and energy to "combatting Trotskyism" than to organizing the combat against the coal operators and their trade union agents.

In the face of such a course, it is natural that the strike should have had so calamitous and pitiful a conclusion. The wretched and cowardly attempts of the Party leadership now to unload the responsibility for their own criminal mismanagement on to the shoulders of the local leaders of the N. M. U., whom they directed at every step with the lash of ruthless discipline, is both revolting and characteristic of Stalinist "self-criticism". The warning of the Communist Opposition, the indications that preparations were lacking, the demand made upon the Party to organize the campaign against the operators instead of against Watt, Angelo and others—all these were unheeded. In the same way, the need for a considered analysis of the strike results is entirely neglected—even prohibited by the Party.

What is outstanding is the fact that the N. M. U. has been practically eliminated from the Illinois field as a decisive factor at the present time. Its opportunity for expansion—particularly in face of the scandalous Fishwick-Lewis fight for the spoils—was shamefully bungled. For this the responsibility rests exclusively and four-square on the shoulders of the Communist Party leaders. The present attempt to retrieve the heavy losses incurred in bungling a big situation by the organization of sporadic small local strikes in camps here and there is only adventurist desperation that must be condemned lest the N. M. U. is completely wiped out and the Left wing is retarded for a long period.

The Communist League reaffirms its position—contrary to that of the I. W. W.—of urging the Illinois miners to join in the strike. Whatever the errors of the leadership, however false the policies they pursue, it is the duty of the militant and class conscious workers and workers' organizations to give wholehearted support to every struggle of the workers, to seek to broaden and deepen its ranks, to clarify it in action and purpose.

As a final consequence of the Illinois strike the foothold gained there for the first time in years by the I. W. W. Even as a passing phenomenon, it has an ominous and instructive significance. If syndicalism (that is, anti-political party; anti-political action; belief in the labor union as the all-sufficient instrument of the working class) is the punishment meted out to the revolutionary movement for the sins of party opportunism and vulgar parlia-

mentarism, it is also one of the ways in which workers frequently repay the workers' political party for mismanagement and for dominating the trade union with the rigidity, bureaucratic arbitrariness, mechanical and formalistic transference of the party into the union which is typical of Stalinism. We warned about such an eventuality months ago in our comments on the Belleville Conference. The sudden spread of erroneous syndicalist conceptions among the Illinois miners may be put entirely at the door of the Party bureaucrats. To re-consolidate the prestige and strength of the Left wing and Communist movements that have been discredited by the methods of the official Party leaders, it will be necessary to approach these syndicalist workers as fighters with whom the closest collaboration must be established. The Party method of calumny and name-calling, instead of seeking to unite with them and discuss the problems and tasks of the movement with the aim of establishing clarity, must be repudiated as entirely false.

2. The Fishwick-Howat-Brophy Convention

The call for an international convention of the U. M. W. A., directed against Lewis and Co., and signed by the Fishwick machine men plus Brophy, Howat, and others, yesterday's allies of the Left wing and the Party, creates a new set of circumstances in the mining industry which can have far-reaching consequences for the Left wing if it proves capable of viewing the situation objectively and acting accordingly. This has also not yet been done by the Party or by the official Left wing which it controls. On the contrary, it has limited itself to substituting mere denunciation for analysis. In place of separating and distinguishing between the various factors in the situation, the Party has resorted to the vulgar method of identifying all groups outside itself and throwing them into one common pot of indistinguishable reaction. Such interpretations of events, which make any serious analysis "unnecessary", is guaranteed in advance to make the Left wing a narrow, ingrown, self-satisfied and uninfluential sect.

The old struggle between the Fishwick-Farrington and the Lewis machines has been going on for years, interrupted at periods only by the necessity of making common cause against the Left wing. That struggle was undoubtedly a fight for loot and position, and failed to move any substantial mass of the miners; it interested primarily the big and petty union officialdom and the operators. What is new in the situation is the fact that men (and the groups they represent) like Brophy, Howat and Dorchy have joined with Fishwick in an anti-Lewis fight; that the socialist party has given virtual endorsement, and the C. P. L. A. (Muste group) outright endorsement to the new combination. The Lewis faction has no progressives in its ranks and does not make the faintest pretense at a progressive program. What distinguishes the Fishwick faction now is precisely the fact that the progressives have joined with it and given it a different coloring, which will vitally affect the attitude of the progressive miners.

The new combination and its convention call is at bottom a sign of vitality in the U. M. W. of A. It will in the first place, have a strong tendency to reconstitute the old union. In other words, it is as much the reflection of the desire in the ranks of the miners for the establishment of a strong union on a progressive basis as it is the expression of the Fishwick machine's intention to capitalize this desire for its own purpose.

The development of this progressive and semi-progressive movement among the miners in the old union is, furthermore, of significance for the labor movement as a whole, particularly for the A. F. of L. It belies again the "theory" of the "complete bankruptcy" of the A. F. of L. and is proof positive that there are still at hand powerful forces—already in movement and potential—in the ranks of the old unions that offer a strong basis for the Left wing and for a struggle against the labor union

bureaucracy and class collaboration. It is a refutation of the schematic (not Marxist) conception held by the Party (particularly by Foster) of the fatalistic "decline of the A. F. of L."—the "theoretical" foundation upon which have been erected the ruinous policies in the trade union movement now pursued by the official Party machine.

There is power behind the new movement. Fishwick-Farrington have a base in control of the Illinois district of the U. M. W. A., which is one of the two remaining districts of the old union still containing a hold on the workers in the industry. More than that, it has associated with it men like Brophy and Howat who have been associated with the progressive and Left wing movement for years, and have a great prestige among the miners throughout the country. The notion prevalent in the minds of the Party leaders that their denunciation of these men for departing from the Left wing movement has "discredited them among the masses of the miners" is entirely false and a replacement of reality by desire.

The progressive and Left wing sentiment remaining in the U. M. W. of A. will therefore incline strongly towards supporting and pushing forward this movement as a "legal expression" of the fight against reaction in the union. More than that, the miners who have dropped out of the union, without joining the N. M. U., or became passive and indifferent, will tend to see in this movement the hope for reconstituting the organization to its former strength and to a new progressivism. The movement, therefore, will tend to become a rallying ground for the dispersed and discouraged progressive and Left wing workers in the old union, the former members in the disrupted districts, and even in the ranks of the National Miners Union itself.

It is entirely true that any hopes or faith whatsoever placed in men like Fishwick, Farrington, John H. Walker, etc., is quite groundless and must end in bitter disappointment. These people have a record which is not one whit different from that of Lewis. Like him, they ruled by the blackjack, gunmen and terror. Like him, they have expelled militants and broken up progressive local unions. Like him, they worked hand in hand with the operators against the elementary interests of the miners. Their arch-type is Farrington, the paid employee of the Peabody Coal Company during his incumbency in the office of Illinois district union president. That is precisely why the Left wing must exercise its influence upon the workers in this movement, drive a wedge between the union misleaders operators' agents, and self-seekers on the one hand and the genuinely progressive elements in the ranks and the leadership on the other.

To deal with this movement by frontal attack and simple denunciation alone, as is the Party method today, to neglect to influence it from within, means only one thing: The Left wing, willy-nilly, will be aiding Fishwick and Co. to establish virtually unhindered domination over tens of thousands of progressive-minded workers who will lean to the new movement. The Left wing must bear in mind that the present C. P. policy is only the other side of a counterfeit coin: Yesterday, the Stalinists united in a most intimate bloc with the most reactionary reformist leaders (Purcell, Chiang Kai-Shek, etc.) without any regard for the masses; today, they again see only the leaders—this time condemning them out of hand—and again forget that there is such a thing as workers in the ranks who follow them. Neither policy has any particular virtue. The second is only a despairing effort to cover up the traces of yesterday's disappointments.

The Left wing cannot regard the formation of the N. M. U. as the end of the problem of the old union which still has the bulk of the organized miners, or as having solved the problems of the Left wing once and for all. It is rather a stage in a long struggle to reconstitute the miners' organization on a national scale on a militant basis. In this struggle the Left wing organized in the National Miners Union must retain its ability to maneuver. With only a few thousand members in its

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