

Next Steps of the American Workers

By ARNE SWABECK

Arising largely out of the present conditions of a deep depression and widespread unemployment, working class forces are now being set into motion. The most pressing question of the moment before the American revolutionary movement therefore, is a correct orientation as a base for formulation of its strategy and tactics among the masses.

It is not yet possible to estimate the extent, the depth and the duration of the present deep depression of American capitalist economy; but certain characteristic features are clearly visible. Financial experts, when speaking seriously and not for mere public consumption, acknowledge the depression but stress every production increase in single industries, particularly the recent gains in steel output in some quarters, as signs of an early recovery. This, of course, is a deliberate policy, which does not alter the actual situation in the least. However, there is today a noticeable difference from the various pre-war crises. The latter were distinct symptoms of growth which were chiefly stoppages in the violent growth of productive machinery and the expansion of markets to make possible certain adjustments necessitated by this rapid process.

Today the United States has reached the stage of large scale structural unemployment, which, in other words, means a standing army of unemployed. This is not merely of those cast out from some industries to be quickly absorbed into other or new developing ones, but "superfluous" workers eliminated by the rapid development of machinery and immensely increased labor productivity in practically every sphere. This is sufficiently borne out by all available reliable statistics.

Unemployment—A Spur to Class Action

The spectre of the standing army of unemployed will hence be haunting the exploiters and become a mighty spur moving the workers toward class action. The direction and the speed this will take in its first stage depends, however, a great deal on the present level of development. Unfortunately it cannot be expected, or even hoped, that the workers will as a mass move with one leap to the Communist party or the "revolutionary unions". Any orientation based upon such hopes will surely come to grief. On the contrary, it is the duty of Communists to be with the masses set in motion and to show the proper direction through such steps that the workers are now ready to take.

With the lines of those seeking work growing longer in front of factory gates, it cannot be expected that the working class will engage in widespread offensive battles. But we know, from what is inherent in the capitalist system, that precisely in this situation the capitalists seek to get out of economic difficulties by increased pressure upon the workers through further reduction of their standard of living and conditions of work. This added pressure leaves no way open for the workers but one of resistance. The logic of this deduction leads to the conclusion of a coming period of defensive battles. The history of the American workers throughout the various crises of capitalist production is replete with defensive battles, before the offensive could again be assumed during the period of recovery. It is also one filled with many attempts to seek a solution in political reform activities, as the most immediate outgrowth of the crisis. This suggests another conclusion that this is the trend of development we face at this moment.

Some Labor History and Struggles

A cursory glance at labor's history from the beginning of trades unionism in the thirties, through the various periods of cyclic crises, shows with almost unflinching regularity the same phenomenon. During times of "prosperity", with its labor shortage and the cost of living invariably out-leaping raises in wages, aggressive strike offensives and expansion of trade unions were on the order of the day. These just as surely changed when a new crisis set in. While these were often accompanied with desperate and violent revolts, the character

and often repeated defeats of the defensive strikes turned the workers' attention toward struggle for political reforms which were often expressed through various forms of labor or middle class parties. This may be said to have been particularly marked up until the "great upheaval" in '85 and '86; but a similar recurrence of developments of more recent date can be noticed. As an example a few facts from the last industrial depression at the end of 1921 and beginning of 1922 will prove very instructive.

The U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics gives the following figures on the character and cause of disputes during the depression. We quote from the years 1919 to 1923, which, although incomplete, are very suggestive. Disputes for wage increases (offensive character) reached in the year 1919 a total of 1,074; for the year 1920 a total of 1,323; 1921 a total of 120; 1922 a total of 133; 1923 (first six months) a total of 318. Disputes in resistance of wage decreases (defensive character) were as follows: Year 1919 a total of 86; year 1920 a total of 147; year 1921 a total of 895; 1922 a total of 256; 1923 (first six months) a total of 20. This is sufficient to show clearly the large extent of disputes of a defensive character, to ward off wage decreases, during the depression, to be immediately reversed and become offensive struggles, for wage increases, during the period of recovery. Similarly, the disputes around demands for union recognition reached their highest during these years with a total of 350 in 1919 and its lowest with only 53 in 1921. The employers' offensive netted them the highest number of direct victories in these disputes in 1921 with a total of 701.

The Political Action of Labor

How does the matter stand, then, with labor political action? One can, of course, speak only of labor political reformist action since the American workers as a mass have not yet learned the necessity of revolutionary action. The more recent labor and farmer-labor party developments arose in 1919 with the formation of the National Farmer-Labor Party at Chicago. In 1920 there was the first appearance of the Farmer-Labor Party of the state of Washington. In some other states there were labor activities within non-partisan political leagues. But in 1922 this movement received a pronounced impetus. During the summer the American Labor Party of New York City was organized; the Minnesota non-partisan political league became re-organized into the Farmer-Labor Party, while a similar reorganization took place in South Dakota. The same year saw the organization of the Progressive Party (farmer-labor) in Idaho and one year later the Farmer-Labor Party of West Virginia. At the "Conference for Progressive Political Action" in Cleveland in 1922, at which a number of international unions and central bodies were represented, a motion made by the Chicago Federation of Labor group to "declare for independent political action by the agricultural and industrial workers through a party of their own" was defeated with a vote of only 64 to 52.

It is significant that these were the developments following right upon the heels of the last industrial depression. The culmination and beginning of the decline of this movement were reached at the July, 1923 convention in Chicago at which the Federated Farmer-Labor Party was formed, but alas—on paper. From the last gasp at the Farmer-Labor Party convention at St. Paul the following year, there have been but little actual signs since in this direction.

The Rising Struggles

The present depression finds the vast gulf of class distinctions greater than ever in the United States. According to government reports the total net profits of all corporations in 1929 after all deductions were made have almost doubled since 1922, rising to an estimated amount of \$9,900,000,000. While profits thus soared, wages paid to workers in manufacturing industries during the same period advanced but 19

per cent, not to speak of the level of the cost of living. From December, 1928 to September, 1929 the Labor Bureau, Inc. estimates that the average wage in the country decreased 2 percent.

It is a foregone conclusion that American imperialism will make efforts abroad to get out of its economic difficulties, through war and otherwise, while simultaneously strengthening its world hegemony. The first steps are already being put into operation. Leaving aside here the matter of the effects of these efforts abroad, American capitalism of course likewise tries to make the workers at home bear the increased burden. The results will almost surely lead to a repetition of past history. But this will take place now, however, under conditions of a higher development of capitalism and also on a higher plane for the working class. The crushing capitalist offensive during the present heavy unemployment, with the aim to reduce wages, increase speed-up and to cripple the unions, will bring forth resistance through workers' defensive struggles. It will certainly involve workers organized in the existing trade unions. The necessarily accompanying despotic use of the capitalist machinery of the state, to carry the offensive through more effectively, points to the workers' resistance in this field taking a direction towards political reformist activities, most likely to be expressed in a labor political party.

The Labor Party and the Communists

Under such conditions would a labor party spring forth as a full fledged instrument of imperialism? Reactionary labor "leaders" would surely become part of its composition and strive for "leadership" there the same as they do in all other broad non-revolutionary workers' organizations. They will, of course, continue in their role as tools of imperialism. Very consciously American imperialism will learn to utilize them as "saviours" of their system and privileges fully as well as in the case of the McDonald government in England today. The American McDonalds in turn will exert all energies to subject the labor party as a whole to further this aim. But their success in this endeavor depends precisely upon their ability to keep Communist influence isolated on the outside. Nevertheless, as a means of helping to separate the working masses from their political bondage to the historical capitalist parties, the labor party would serve as well today as in the past and would occupy the same place in history as previously assigned to it. In that sense it will be one step toward the logical revolutionary position that the American working class must finally assume.

So far, this working class, as its history shows, has only reached the point of more or less localized and sporadic attempts in reformist politics. It is still completely bound within the capitalist political party system which thereby serves as a mighty brake upon the essential character of any economic struggles of the workers. That is today decisive, and the problem is to break through this barrier. Increased pressure upon the workers will lead to finding the forms for breaking through. What road will the first steps take? The road of the revolution with the Communist Party? That is quite inconceivable, even with a rapid tempo of development. Can we in America avoid the stage of a national scale of labor political reformist activities? That is the way to put the question, and to also add, that even though it can hardly be avoided, it will of necessity be of short duration in the present epoch of rapid development. It then becomes pertinent to ask, how can the working class best and most speedily draw the correct conclusion from such political reformist experiences, and how can it best be helped on the further road to a revolutionary position?

Upon the Communist movement devolves the duty of giving a correct answer to this question as well as to employ the tactics which will really be a help in the right direction. This we intend to discuss further in another article.

HOOVER SPEEDS POSTAL CLERKS

BUFFALO—Hoover has issued his cry "Efficiency". The Buffalo postal employees have already been "efficiency-ized" so much that they carried their complaint to Congress. An investigator was sent to Buffalo. He investigated—the clerks sweated; and now the report has been handed in. The official report admits the truth of the complaints that the new system is "nerve-wracking and a slave-driving one", and undoubtedly "showing a lack of consideration for the clerks", but, continues the report, "the mail service comes before the clerk".

In short, the present speed-up helps business and decreases the money necessary for clerks (thus leaving more for the politicians in the form of supervisors and inspectors.) So the speed-up is approved and continued.

The Post Office clerks appealed to Congress and now they are left holding the bag. Thus far they have been afraid to resort to any but congressional action for the improvement of their conditions. The Post Office speed-up is recognized by all connected with the service. Since 1921, according to government reports, the output per man has increased over 32%. Nor has this been due to increased use of machinery. It is due to the system, to the foreman at your side ready to jump on you and "write you up" the minute you turn your head.

A long fight is ahead of the postal clerks before this speed-up is eliminated. No amount of Congressional appeal will ever do away with the constant riding of the "efficiency administrators". The clerks will have to initiate a movement for a bona fide and strong union.

The London Debacle

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will be achieved is obvious from the whole viewpoint of capitalist diplomacy, which can only try to solve its differences in the arena of war.

The Lineup against the Soviet Union

The question of the relations of the powers to the Soviet Union received special consideration during one of the sessions in which there appeared no possible solution to the conference negotiations. Japan opened with a defense of its naval program on the basis that her position off the coast of Siberia demanded that she be fully prepared to take part in a general offensive against the Workers Republic. This set a precedent which was followed by the other powers. France and Italy in particular emphasized this as one of the main reasons for their naval program. It goes without saying that all of the powers have in mind an attack against the Soviet Union and that this conference has already posed the question of the relation of forces between these imperialist wolves in that event. The problem of the defense of the Soviet Union grows greater and greater and becomes one of the chief tasks of the international proletariat.

Conference Can Offer No Solution

It is clear that the London conference will arrive at nothing definite regarding naval limitation. The disappointment of Social Democracy and Pacifism is a great one. Their hopes have been shattered through the miserable collapse of the conference in which they planned such exalted hopes. Along with this destroyed hope, the open betrayal of McDonald has become so much the more clear in his resignation from the Independent Labor Party—and his complete solidification with British Imperialism.

The much heralded London conference has collapsed. Attempts to revive it will fall exceedingly short of their mark.

The problem of war remains as ever the problem of the international proletariat irrespective of sham conferences, utilized only to mislead the workingclass and put them in a state of false security. Its solution lies in the destruction of this system of exploitation and war.

—AJBERT GLOTZER