

A Seaman on Conditions

The Militant
Dear Comrades:

Shipping today isn't what it was. It never is. The man who comes before the board in the Seamen's Institute with his discharge in his hand and his heart in his mouth, every time the high priest comes out to chalk up a job, vowing that if he gets a ship that's half decent, he will never be on the beach again, had better get wise to himself. There isn't any such animal today as a half decent ship and the average seaman knows that.

To meet competition in this industry and to carve himself a good hunk of profit the ship owner in America, as elsewhere, builds his ships so that they can be loaded and discharged faster and cheaper, builds them with Diesel Engines and oil burners instead of coal burners. Iron mikes and pneumatic chippers and spray painting outfits are installed. But he cuts his crew down to a skeleton (and some of them look like skeletons after a month or two on some wagons I know). They are cutting below the level demanded by ordinary safety. In a word, he overloads his ships and overworks his crew. Hence we have Vestris disasters, which will become more common in the future. Ramsay MacDonald who is chief spokesman and lord high juggler for the British capitalists now has demanded a raising of the load line and what the British ship owners says, goes in the marine industry.

What does it matter to this high-souled blatherskite, if thousands of seamen are condemned to certain death, so long as it means an extra margin of profit to the class he supports?

America, as a great imperialist nation, feels the need of a merchant marine, not only for peaceful trade, but as an useful auxiliary to the fleet in case of war. The Jones-White Pact passed last year grants subsidies to American shipowners to build ships in accordance with the plans of the Naval Board, and shows which way the wind blows. Already shipowners are getting into action with the full support of the U. S. government and are preparing to fight a stiff battle for mercantile supremacy with Great Britain.

Seamen Disorganized

If the events in the marine industry since the war are any criterion, one can see the ship owners have driven seamen back all over the world. The I. S. U. and I. W. W., once proud and powerful organizations, now exist as a mere shadow of their former selves, pale ghosts who haunt the waterfront. The N. S. U. of Great Britain with its PC 5 is in reality under the control of the shipowners. Everywhere, with one or two exceptions, seamen are demoralized, conditions aboard the ships are utterly barbarous. Bulldozing and hazing with blackjacks by the officers take place. The 2 watch system is practically universal, with all kinds of dodges to get unpaid overtime work.

As for improvement in these conditions, look at what is happening. The new ships Europa and Bremen of the Nord Deutscher Lloyd symbolize the increasing tempo of competition for trade, fanning to a white heat the already intense struggle. The freight market has continually been dropping for years.

American finance capital intends to build a merchant fleet, and the cost-price, with a profit attached, will be paid for by the blood and sweat and suffering of American seamen. For \$50 per month meantime and later for less. The ship owners stand well organized, well prepared for the battle.

What leadership does the Party offer the seamen?

The policy of the Communist party in the Seamen's League, has been a duplicate of that followed in the coal miners' union and elsewhere. All non-Party elements of any standing among the seamen are ousted or kept submerged. Anyone, even Party members who oppose or differ from secretary Mink are likewise ousted and attempts made to discredit them. While in a paper the outfit struggles to build a

union which the rank and file will control through ship committees, the reality of the situation was expressed by Hines, the New York secretary. He told at a membership meeting, which was in revolt against the bureaucratic methods and lack of initiative of the League officers, that "the T. U. U. L. would run the League and not the seamen". Mind you, I had to ask several who were present at the meeting before I could believe it. That seamen are willing to organize and fight the hellish ship conditions afloat is obvious.

A Narrow Policy

The Longshoremen are likewise disgusted with the grafting and sellout tactics of Joe Ryan and company. The Marine Workers League has made a little progress, in spite of its leadership rather than because of it. Right here are workers prepared to struggle. Drop the monkey business, and backstairs "third period" diplomacy. Encourage the rank and file to

Miners' Conventions

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Farrington was finally seated, after a stormy debate which consumed the greater part of two days, by a vote of 225 to 145. The fight over the credentials of this reactionary crook and grafter became the dominating issue of the convention. It symbolized the elements of corruption and reaction in the new union and the determination of the rank and file to uproot them. The vote was, to a certain extent, a measure of comparative strength of the two forces on a show-down issue, a measure that was weighted in favor of the reactionaries by the Left wing boycott of the convention.

Farrington, formerly president of the Illinois district and long a bitter enemy of all progressive tendencies in the union, was exposed in 1926 as the paid employee of the Peabody Coal Company under contract at \$25,000 per year. He was expelled in 1926 and re-admitted recently into the union after the break of the Illinois District with the Lewis organization. The case against Farrington is clear and undisputable. At the time of his expulsion a letter written to him by Peabody was made public by Lewis in which Farrington, protesting against Peabody's instructions not to run again for the office of district president, said: "I feel that I can serve you better as an official of the Miners' union". Despite this clear proof of his perfidy, Fishwick, who had been Farrington's henchman and an accomplice in his evil deeds, backed his credentials and jammed them through with the weight of the Illinois district machine.

What effect this action and the battle which centered around it will have on the fortunes of the new union remains to be seen. Farrington hailed the result as a "vindication of his honor", but he followed it with the announcement that he would take his seat and participate no further in the convention. Nevertheless, he remains a power behind the scenes in the Illinois district organization, the strongest body in the union, and the issue remains. The progressive rank and file forces consolidated themselves in the struggle to unseat Farrington and an expansion of the new union in the coal fields will create the conditions to broaden these forces and increase their strength.

Progressives Measures Brought Forward

The power developed in the fight over this question forced a number of progressive measures through the convention. Among them were the following: the amendment of the preamble to replace the demand for "an equitable share of the fruits of their labor" with the demand for "the full social value of their product"; the five-day week and six-hour day from bank to bank; the advocacy of unemployment insurance; the reduction of officers salaries by 50 per cent and restrictions of their powers.

One measure, pushed through on the

look after their welfare in the organization.

A broadening of the leadership is necessary. Seamen will certainly fight for better conditions. More attention to the everyday struggles of the seamen and less prominence to the latest contortions of the third period.

It is not enough to line up a member and then let him drift away. A man becomes a member in a haphazard and lackadaisical manner and then he is of no further interest or else he is informed that so and so are a bunch of saboteurs. This causes him to quit. Why not try to put some of the paper resolutions into practice?

Two years have passed and still no union, and unless the Party's throttling grip is relaxed, then the new union will die. The situation demands action. Either the Party means business, in which event the bureaucratic methods now adopted will have to be dropped or else the Party and League will get nowhere. Seamen demand a showdown, as they say on the waterfront.

—JAMES RUSSELL

wave of sentiment for union democracy—the provision for greater autonomy of the district organizations—which was promoted as a safeguard against the autocracy of national officials made so odious by Lewis, opens the door for trouble from another quarter. Such decentralization is, at bottom, a step backward. In practice it will weaken the national battle-front of the union and provide justification for strike-breaking separate agreements by treacherous District officials of the Fishwick type. Moreover, while it will tend to protect a progressive district against the disruptive interference of a Lewis, it will also shield a reactionary and corrupt district machine from the corrective influence of the national organization. The Fishwick-Farrington elements undoubtedly supported district autonomy with such considerations in mind.

Already at the Springfield convention the principle of autonomy—on its face a step forward—was invoked in defense of Fishwick and Nesbit against the proposal from the floor for their removal. John Hindmarsh, speaking on these proposals, said that "for the convention to meddle in the internal affairs of a district would mean giving the new union's officers the power we are seeking to wrest from Lewis". It was this argument that shielded them from the demand for an accounting of their administration of the district organization. It also helped to squeeze through the credentials of Farrington. It will have similar implications in the future if Howat, as president of the national organization, disappoints their calculations to use him as a harmless decoration of progress and militancy for their reactionary designs.

Communists Adopt Isolation Policy

An interesting feature of the Springfield convention was the re-emergence of the socialist elements and the assertion of socialist influence in the new union. The Socialist party, once a power in the United Mine Workers, has had no influence whatever in recent years. Its place was taken by the rising Communist party which, fighting aggressively and employing skillful tactics, gained influence over a big progressive movement of the rank and file. The Communists have lately maneuvered themselves onto a side track by ill-advised tactics ("boycott the Springfield convention!") and made no effort to assert themselves in this new movement. The Socialists, who are no doubt grateful to the "third period" for this opportunity, made the most of it to edge into a strong position at Springfield. The election of Germer as vice president of the new union is the symbol of a formidable socialist advance in one of the most important sectors of the American labor movement.

Next week's Militant will contain further detailed reports of the Springfield convention and the first of a series of analytical articles on the miners' union and the tasks of the Left wing.

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SIX MONTHS FOR REFUSAL TO SALUTE FLAG

SAN FRANCISCO—It will cost Henry Keister six months of his life because he refused to salute the American flag at a Washington's birthday parade. He was jailed under the open charge of vagrancy later turned to contempt of court when Keister maintained his refusal to salute the flag in Police Judge Steiger's court and denounced labor conditions. He is held in jail under \$250 bail pending appeal.