

THE SITUATION AMONG THE COAL MINERS

By ARNE SWABECK

Open rebellion on a wider scale than ever before is once more the answer to the rule of corruption and reactionary policies which have long dominated the United Mine Workers Union and reduced it to a mere shadow of its former strength. Its main result to date, that of setting important working class forces into motion, notwithstanding its as yet obscure direction, may have far reaching significance for the immediate future of the American labor movement. Without recognition of these facts, a correct estimate of the events in connection with the split producing two unions, both laying claim to the title, United Mine Workers of America, cannot be reached.

The old union now even more securely lodged in the grip of John L. Lewis, with his arbitrary powers extended and his past reactionary wrecking policies given the seal of approval by a delegation largely representing locals and districts long since defunct, at the Indianapolis convention, is well known to the coal miners. As far as the rank and file membership is concerned, the past history has left its marks. The cowardly retreat of the Lewis administration in the face of the government injunction in the 1919 national strike and subsequent crushing of insurrectionary strike movements; the sell-out of the 1922 national strike, leaving some 100,000 Pennsylvania miners who had just joined the union in the lurch; the betrayal of the Pennsylvania and Ohio miners and the defeat of their strike in 1927-28; the breaking up and destruction of district after district with the suppression of all opposition, expulsions and gunman rule—these are but a few high points of Lewis' regime. They are so commonly known that it cannot be expected that the coal miners should now hark back to support the remnants of his union or even have much sympathy left for it.

A most vital question therefore is what the new union signifies and what its prospects are. Its leadership, apparent at the Springfield convention, can be recognized at a glance: A combination of forces composed of a section of the old corrupt and reactionary officialdom—the Fishwick-Farrington machine; socialist party types like Germer and Ameringer; and progressive, or one time progressive, elements, typified by Howat, Brophy and Hapgood.

Serious Errors of Wrong Analysis

The official Communist party disposed rather quickly of the significance of this new union and the perspectives for it. It was viewed merely as a matter of Peabody, the coal operator magnate, hiring some more help and already asserting his ownership of the union. That, of course, is no analysis whatever, since it fails entirely to recognize the workers set into motion or take account of the objective position of the new union. Conclusions for a policy based upon such an analysis, can lead only to further fatal mistakes, to neglect of opportunities for extension of militancy, and to even further isolation of the Left wing directed by the Party. It is upon just such mistakes that the Fishwicks and Walkers thrive and are able still to maintain a hold upon the miners.

A series of tactical mistakes have been made by the Left wing under the official Communist party direction, which in sum and substance has assumed the character of a system of wrong policies ever since the formation of the National Miners Union. It culminated in the last ill-fated Illinois strike, and to a great extent made it possible for Fishwick, Farrington and Walker to leave the sinking ship of the Lewis administration and to edge in on the crest of the naturally maturing rebellion. Moreover, the Left wing became impotent and no positive factor at all in these events.

What Does the New Union Signify?

First of all, it should be remembered that the new union came about as a rebellion against the worst features of the corrupt regime of John L. Lewis and threw into its foremost ranks, Howat, the one who to the miners symbolizes their traditional militancy. In that sense it certainly signifies a step in a

progressive direction. Secondly to regard this first step as a finished product would be sheer folly. This important section of the working class set into motion, breaking the bounds of the Lewis rule, cannot be expected to be checked or cowed by a Fishwick or other, like him, coal operator agents. Thirdly, there is the objective position of the new union, with a basis of rebellion, to be considered. Competition with Lewis in delivering the goods to the operators, after what has happened to his union, does not lead one to believe that much rank and file support could be gained along that road. No; to avoid stagnation and early death it will be compelled at least to move in a forward and a progressive direction. The rank and file, who have proved their fighting capacity in the past, will be certain to press in that direction and there is no better way at present to eliminate Fishwick and all his henchmen of the old machine. This forward course should be aided and given definite meaning by the Left wing.

Rather indicative of the trend of developments, aside from the factors already mentioned, is such an incident at the Springfield convention as the driving of Fishwick from the chairmanship at the first session and the election of Howat for that post, and later on for the Presidency of the union. This is solely because Howat symbolizes to the miners their militant struggle against the operators. On the other hand, the fact that the seating of Frank Farrington—an openly acknowledged agent of the Peabody coal company, who had the crust to tell the delegates that he accepted his \$25,000 a year position in order to "step aside, secure a wage cut for the membership and thus save the union"—the fact that the acceptance of his credentials could command such a big majority vote clearly show the immense strength of the reactionary Fishwick-Farrington-Walker combine within the union. But even that relationship can be changed, and more swiftly so, with a broadly organized Left wing in this union giving the necessary direction for the struggle: Or—will anybody perhaps maintain that Left wing workers have no business within a union which has in its ranks the majority of the organized soft coal miners in the United States and has union control over their jobs?

Reactionaries Strengthen Hold—But Workers Move On

At times, when workers are stirred into action, one can always observe reactionary forces, labor lieutenants of capitalism, becoming active. They endeavor to follow the tide, try to get into a commanding position and assume, if necessary, a progressive front, both to advance their own personal interests and to serve their masters at the opportune moment by using their position to check the movement, to lead it into harmless channels, and to work for its complete annihilation. At present the wrecking career of John L. Lewis has left him much discredited in the eyes of the workers; but the Fishwick machine is there to continue Lewis' role. That has been sufficiently established by its record in Illinois of wage cuts and sell-outs, expulsions of militants and the use of gunmen, police and militia against struggling miners. History has repeated itself, and this machine has been able to maintain itself in a commanding position within the present rebellious movement. The militants cannot compromise a single one of their principles with this outfit. Against it the ceaseless struggle must continue.

Concerning the so-called progressives, Brophy, Hapgood and the others who as yet, in the eyes of many miners, symbolize militancy against Lewis and the operators, there can be no illusions whatsoever. They are careerists who regard Communism as weakened and compromised today; they do not find it useful at present to cover themselves with sympathy for it. These Amer-

ican species of trade union centrists need to be steadily exposed for their weaknesses and vacillations. The miners must continually be on guard to thwart inevitable betrayal and treachery from them. A powerful Left wing in this new union will be one of the ways to guide this movement into militant channels, and at the same time to expose more effectively these so-called progressives who will more and more openly, as time passes, be the fig-leaf for the Fishwicks, Lewises, etc.

At this very moment additional evidence has been given to indicate that the miners will continue in motion in a progressive direction. A number of Illinois local unions have already made decisions to reinstate all members expelled by the Fishwick machine since 1928. These are the expelled militants who were with the "Save the Union" movement.

How Far Will the Rebellion Reverberate?

Unquestionably, this open rebellion and split, which brought about this new miners' union, set a precedent dangerous to reactionary machine control in other trade unions. It is certain to produce reverberations within the A. F. of L.; if nothing else, then at least the problem of facing a new "dual" union with a considerable base among the workers. Indicative of this already is the support thrown by Green to John L. Lewis as against the new union.

The impotence of the present A. F. of L. officialdom, from the top down practically speaking, and failure to secure even the slightest assistance for the workers during this crisis, has been glaring. Their absolute partnership with capitalism is now laid even more open and bare. The assaults of the employers, who take advantage of the crisis and permanent and mass unemployment, as well as the prospect for coming, perhaps turbulent, defensive struggles by the workers may also seriously shake the apparently secure position of this trade union bureaucracy.

In regard to the present status of the coal miners, one must not fail to take into account the several serious defeats suffered during the last few years, in which official treason was no small factor. The immediate effects of a serious economic crisis and the extensive displacement of labor by machine and mechanical mining, coming closely upon the heels of these defeats, will not tend to produce the swift development of offensive battles by the workers. But on the other hand, these very problems, embodying continuous assaults upon their meager existence, become bound up with active resistance—with struggle. Under these conditions, plus the quite solid phalanx presented by the coal operators toward the workers' aims, the most thorough preparations and most complete organization possible become questions of serious import. We reserve this particular point for another time. But certainly it must be admitted that with three unions in the field, this problem is, at best, yet more complex. However, that fact merely serves to emphasize the continuous process of development and change in the social world. In this case it represents a new "stage in a long struggle to reconstitute the miners' organization on a national scale on a militant basis."

Left Wing Facing Serious Problems

The National Miners Union remains the only union resting programmatically on a class foundation; but, as has often been emphasized, despite its objectively favorable position and the courage and determination displayed, the other two unions retain the membership of those miners who are at all organized and have union control over their jobs. Will the Left wing and the Stalinized Party leadership continue its policy of trying to withdraw the best elements from these unions where they have job control, thus eliminate these elements from the industry and isolate itself from these important sections of organized workers; or will it again take up the correct Leninist

position of maintaining the closest contact and extending its influence among them? That is now the decisive question. A return to a correct policy can yet make the National Miners Union—that is, the organized Left wing—an important factor both in developments in the unorganized fields as well as within the organized sections. But its methods and functions must of necessity constantly change in conformity with developing conditions.

The union still under control of John L. Lewis embraces important sections of coal miners. Within it are, particularly in the light of the latest events, possibilities to spread the ferment and to do away with this corrupt regime.

The new union is officially committed to the aim of the six hour day, the five day week and unemployment insurance. These were adopted at the Springfield convention, the presence of the Fishwick machine elite notwithstanding. These two points, the shorter work day and social insurance, were the two specific points correctly emphasized in the Communist address to the American Party membership last year as practical demands to be put forward in the daily struggles of the workers. Their adoption by the new miners union should serve to make it a more favorable starting point for further development toward a greater militant basis. But this will require systematic, correct Left wing activities and devoted work.

In conclusion it is well to restate the position of Lenin:

"Undoubtedly, the leaders of opportunism will have recourse to all the tricks of bourgeois diplomacy, will appeal to the help of bourgeois governments, to priests, police courts, in order to prevent Communists from entering the trade unions, by all and every means to put them out, to make their work inside these organizations as unpleasant as possible, to insult, hound and persecute them. It is necessary to be able to withstand all this, to go the whole length of any sacrifice, if need be, to resort to strategy and adroitness, illegal proceedings, reticence and subterfuge, to anything in order to penetrate into the trade unions, to remain in them and carry on Communist work inside them at any cost." ("Left" Communism, page 36.)

Machines Displace More Miners

Displacement of coal miners by machinery makes a new record in the stripping operations on the Northern Pacific Railroad properties at Coalstrip, Montana. The Scientific American describes the new Bucyrus-Erie coal loading shovel that lifts out more than eight tons at a time, dumps it into gondola cars skirting the pit and returns for a new load all in 45 seconds. Operated by only two or three men it digs and loads 5,000 tons in a 10-hour shift. With the aid of a smaller loader a total of 20,000 tons are loaded in 24 hours, enough to fill 300 of the 70-ton cars recently purchased by the company.

A dirt stripping machine bites out 15 tons of earth at a chunk, depositing it a city block away at a height of 10 stories if necessary all in one operation. The pick and shovel man is out of date here.

Miners unemployment grows.

SIXTEEN COAL MINERS DIE IN BLAST

KETTLE RIVER, Ky.—Rescue workers striving to save 16 coal miners trapped by a gas explosion in the mine here, have found bodies of six. The other 10 are believed dead from heat and gas which filled the shaft after the blast had crippled the ventilating system. One victim was 17 years old and the others had wives and children.

Over 30 rescue workers, who believed the remaining bodies may not be found for several days are themselves in danger from the fumes.