

Aftermath of Needle Trades Convention

1. Questions of a Left Wing Program

By James P. Cannon

The convention of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union met at a critical period in the Left wing labor movement. Great and complicated questions of the struggle for a class union, directly affecting the welfare of the sweated and oppressed workers in the industry and bearing on the course of Left wing unionism in general, pressed insistently upon this convention for an answer. They pressed in vain. A false answer was given there to the basic questions of external policy as well as to those relating to the internal life of the union.

Errors which have accumulated into a system and brought about a crisis in the organization, weakening it in the face of its great tasks and responsibilities and supplying a corresponding strength to its enemies, were formally ratified and laid down as a guiding line for the future. The Stalin faction of the Communist Party, which held the convention in the steel vise of mechanical control, gave another demonstration there of its bankruptcy on the trade union question. Repercussions from the convention decisions will be sure and swift; they will fall upon the union, and consequently upon the workers whose fate is bound up with it, like heavy blows over the head.

Party Factionalism Dominates

The convention was a field day for Party factionalism. It was consecrated primarily to a pogrom against the adherents of Lovestone—a disgusting exhibition of mob spirit, full of menace for the future of a union. Howls and boos and the caucus steam-roller—these were the answers to all criticisms and proposals, regardless of their merit, which did not emanate from the Party steering committee. Not even blows were spared in the "ideological" struggle. The Lovestoneites, who were the first to employ these methods in the Communist and Left wing movement, got a double dose of their own medicine at the Needle Trades Workers conventions. But it was not they who will be the losers by it. The Stalinists, who imagined that their mob and hooligan tactics were contributing to the struggle against Lovestoneism, were only demonstrating how well they have acquired some of its most abominable features. The Left wing movement and the Communist Party will pay a heavy price for every "victory" gained by these means.

Factional exclusion from the leading bodies of the union did not stop at the Lovestoneites, the "excluders" of yesterday. Members of the Party who have ventured to exercise a mild "self-criticism" against the ruling bureaucrats were also eliminated from all positions. Everything was cut and dried in advance to the last detail. The "democracy" was simply window-dressing for the gullible. Johnstone, the Party representative, bossed the convention like an arrogant drill sergeant, the veritable symbol of triumphant ignorance! The leadership of the union, which had already been whittled down to Party members, was still further narrowed to members of the Stalin faction of the Party. Thus the Stalinists strengthen their position in the apparatus by weakening the base of the union among the masses. On the side of internal policy the union is worse off than before.

False Attitude on Left Wing

In the most important and decisive questions of external policy the convention also gave the wrong answers. By declaring formally against the organization of a Left wing in the reactionary unions in the industry the convention chopped away the bridge to the workers in these unions, and they are the overwhelming majority of the organized workers in the industry. This decision, and the theory which motivates it—that the right wing unions are "company unions"—are both wrong and are bound to bring catastrophic results.

There may be some who go so far as to think that this decision has sealed the doom of the new union of the Left wing. But in our judgement such an opinion is not well founded. The danger that the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union will degenerate into an impotent sect no doubt exists, and this danger has been increased by the unwise decisions of the convention. But there is yet time to correct the course. It is to this

task that the militants of the Left Opposition, who are assembling in the union, must devote themselves. The first prerequisite for success in this struggle for the salvation of the union is clarity in their own ranks on the question of a program for the union. This is the decisive question. The present relation of forces means little; it will be shattered by the impact of events, and soon enough. The correct program is the basis on which the Opposition Communists, triumphant forces of tomorrow, will secure their victory—and the victory of the Left wing workers.

The Relation of Forces

Our policy must proceed from an analysis of the actual situation and the present relation of forces in the industry. Facts and not wishes are important here. The situation is approximately as follows:

In the industry as a whole there are over 500,000 workers.

The Right wing unions have between 150,000 and 200,000 members.

The Left wing union has at most 6,000 members—less in good standing.

Consider these figures for a moment. The Right wing unions contain about 40% of the workers in the entire industry; the Left wing union has about 1%. A further concretization shows that the membership of the Left wing union has the bulk of its organized strength in the dress making shops. Its hold on the cloak makers and

furriers is very weak organizationally at the present time. In the men's clothing field, the field dominated by the Amalgamated, the strongest union in the industry, it has nothing. In the millinery section it has little. These figures are very important as a point of departure, but they do not tell the whole story. There are other important factors more favorable to the Left union.

The figures cited above are not a true representation of the actual strength of the rival organizations. The membership of the Right wing unions, and particularly of the International Ladies Garment Workers, is based on shop control, agreements with the bosses and job compulsion. Thanks to the partnership of the union officials with the bosses, a partnership sealed by the capitalist state power, the workers are compelled to belong to the Right wing union in order to get work in the shops affected. Terrorism, hunger and the demoralization of the Left wing forces were the whips with which the workers were driven into the Right wing ranks.

Vitality of Lefts

Sympathy for the Left wing is very strong among large sections of these registered workers. All informed workers in the trade testify to this. "My heart is with you but I must make a living," is a common answer of the registered workers to the appeals of the Left wing. There is no doubt that the Left wing influence has declined in the past two years but it re-

Delegations to U.S.S.R. and the Opposition

The International Committee of the Federation of Friends of the Soviet Union has launched an appeal to the workers and labor organizations of Germany, England, Ireland, France, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Luxemburg, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Canada concerning the invitations of the Central Council of the Trade Unions of the Soviet Union to send Workers Delegations in June and July.

In the course of its struggle with the official leadership of the Comintern and its centre, the Stalin faction, the International Left Opposition with the Russian Opposition at its head has despite all slander and distortion of its position continually manifested its solidarity with the Communist workers and their Party, its unreserved devotion to the Russian workers' state. In its struggle with the self-satisfied officialdom, the Left Opposition has never for a moment forgotten the magnitude of the revolutionary achievements, despite the innumerable mistakes of the leadership. On the contrary, to extend this gigantic labor and to fortify it was the sum and substance of the activity of the Opposition. Hence we warmly welcome the appeal of the Friends of the Soviet Union. The workers delegations to the Soviet Union have always occupied a foremost place in the defence of the Soviet Union against the wild campaigns of the capitalist press and particularly in the exposure of the contemptible slanders of the social democratic leadership. The workers' delegations issuing out of the oppressive atmosphere of the citadels of Imperialism breathe in a new atmosphere of proletarian freedom and learn to know with their own eyes the gigantic achievements of their class.

The call for the election of delegates comes at a time which is characterized by a retrogression of the Communist movement in sharpest contradiction to the favorable objective situation. The ebb of the masses from Communism has unfortunately also weakened their active interest in the Soviet Union. All the more energetically is it necessary that the masses participate in the campaign for the election and dispatch of workers' delegations. But the huge pressure exercised by the Party apparatus atus now as before hamstringing the initiative and mobility of the working class element. Nothing could more effectively undermine the value and purpose of the delegations than the artificial undemocratic methods in their composition, bureaucratic tricks and machinations. The Opposition must fight shoulder to shoulder with the revolutionary workers that the delegations be the result of an active and interested movement of the workers

maintains a powerful force in the masses. And the leadership of the Communist Party in the Left wing movement is indisputable. There is no other important power.

These facts are a remarkable testimony to the vitality of the Left wing movement among the needle trades workers and to their deep-seated hatred for the Socialist betrayers. Not all the compulsion and terrorism of the bosses, the reactionary labor leaders and the police, and—what is equally noteworthy—not all the blunders of the Party and Left union leadership, have been able to change fundamentally the sentiments of the workers. The real strength of the Left wing union is much stronger in the sympathy of the masses than its organization, as that of the Right wing unions is weaker.

The five or six thousand members of the Left wing union are, for the most part, the battle-ried militants, the dynamic force in the industry. They constitute, and will constitute, the core of the future fighting movement which will smash the present alignment. A Communist policy for the next stages of the struggle must be based on them, as in the past. There is the reserve power which is not shown by the membership figures of the rival unions.

The Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union is not an artificial creation. It was formed as the result of an unavoidable split forced by the traitorous leaders of the I.L.G.W.U. and the Furriers' Union. It had masses of workers behind it. The Left union has a real base in sections of the industry and, as such, has every claim to support. The first point in Communist policy must be: to organize the unorganized and build the new union.

But this is only part of the proper program, not the whole of it as the convention proclaimed. In next week's article we will undertake to explain the necessity of organizing a broad Left wing in the reactionary unions of the industry, the methods and slogans with which this task can be accomplished, and the falsity of the theory of "Company Unionism" which has been invented to justify a suicidal policy.

The Militant invites Left wing needle trades workers to write for its columns on the situation in the union and to give their views on the problems of their movement. Articles written in any language will be translated into English and printed. The Daily Worker is the closed organ of the cynical bureaucrats—the Militant aims to become the voice of the militant rank and file.

Trade Union Policy

A correct policy on the trade union question and its consistent execution by a sound Communist leadership are decisive for the expansion of the Party as the leaders of the struggling masses. Moreover, the tactics of the Left wing, led by the Party, a dynamic force of gigantic importance, will be one of the most vital determining factors in the future course and development of the trade union movement.

The narrowing base of the A. F. of L. and the increasingly reactionary conduct and policy of its leadership raise before the Party and the Left wing the problem of organizing the unorganized workers in the basic industries, primarily the unskilled and half-skilled, who are becoming radicalized and ready for struggle. It is the task of the Party and Left wing to lead in the work of organizing these masses into new industrial unions. The center of gravity in our trade union work belongs to this sphere. This has been indicated by the whole situation for some time and the long delay of the Party in shaping its course in this direction due to the resistance of the leadership, has already had extremely harmful consequences.

— FROM THE PLATFORM OF THE COMMUNIST OPPOSITION ADOPTED (CHICAGO) MAY 20, 1929.

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