

Operators Prey Upon Passivity of the Coal Miners

By ARNE SWABECK

Reverberations from the soft coal miners revolt against the ruinous rule of the John L. Lewis machine in the United Mine Workers have come back as a resounding echo from the anthracite. So far, however, it has been only as disorganized expression of universal rank and file discontent; given voice at the recent tri-disaster gains from being made and facilitated position of "progressive" elements, but resulting in some serious defeats for Lewis. The practically complete absence of an organized conscious Left wing prevented further pains from being made and facilitated the obscuring of some of the most burning issues.

With deep-seated general discontent in the anthracite the sentiment at the convention testifies eloquently to the pressure of the membership for a clean-cut fighting policy. No doubt, there is a rich field and a great need for Left wing direction has been frittered away through a series of senseless mistakes everywhere in the mine fields. This is a condition for which the official Communist Party leadership is mainly responsible and has resulted in the almost complete isolation of the Left wing.

Lewis suffered defeat first in his endeavors to avoid holding the convention and when it took place despite his desires as a result of insistent demands of the local unions. Lewis suffered a defeat 5 to 1 on his main proposition to authorize his handpicked scale committee to negotiate the "best possible contract". But the disorganized opposition, led by "progressives", did not succeed, or did not care, to get favorable action on the needs of wage increases, shorter workday, unemployment relief and a determined fight against the contracting system.

New Union Grows Under "Friendly" Auspices of Operators

Meanwhile the move started by Illinois local miners unions to reinstate members previously expelled for opposition to the corrupt bureaucracy—both the John L. Lewis and the Howatt-Fishwick union are endeavoring to turn to their account. Both sides can well afford to use this method of catering to the Left wing in its present disorganized state with no intention displayed as yet to seriously contest with them for influence over the rank and file membership. The Howatt-Fishwick union, thanks to its objective position of an insurgent movement without as yet having had to face a test of struggle with the operators, is able to claim considerable gains. For example, during the first two months of its existence, the new union claims 21 new locals organized in Oklahoma, Arkansas and Texas, three locals in Indiana, one in Iowa and ten in Ohio. The total membership, dues paying and exempt, for the period, it claims to be 51,618.

From its inception the new union has "enjoyed" the most friendly attitude from the Illinois operators headed by the large Peabody Co. It was decidedly evidenced in the Springfield court decision barring Lewis from interfering in Illinois fields. The Black Diamond, organ of the Illinois operators, gave favorable publicity to the Springfield convention, commenting on the selection of John H. Walker for secretary that: "During the years he has been associated with the labor movement of Illinois, Walker has gained the confidence of leaders in all branches of business and industry". This friendly attitude is already being translated into "harmonious collaboration" on the job in carrying out the notorious Fishwick contract to the advantage of the operators. The friendly attitude is surely to be appreciated by Fishwick, possibly also by Howatt, the coal miners, however, should have no difficulty in remembering that only the contracts had any value, which were gained by militant struggle and maintained by organized power in face of the hostility of the bosses.

Undoubtedly the Howatt-Fishwick union has prospects of growth, at least for a time. The fact that it came about as a result of a revolt against the Lewis machine, a revolt which for the moment stirred many miners into action and now compels it to move on for organization; the fact that due to Howatt's past militant reputation it can generate some hopes by its apparently progressive front, coupled with the important fact that conditions in the unorganized fields in particular have forced the miners practically below the subsistence level, eager for organization, these will all count in its favor. But it will be the kind of temporary gains caused

by workers grasping for a last straw in a desperate situation. It cannot count on lasting rank and file support or become a factor contributing to the organization of a real union embracing all the miners, without policies of militant struggle and without a leadership free from past corruptions and ready to stand solid as a rock for these policies. This, however, cannot be expected under the benevolent tutelage of the coal operators.

Will the Two Unions Unite?

What are the points of division between the two unions, both claiming the title of United Mine Workers? First and foremost one must judge by the rank and file membership. And there can be no denying the fact that the Howatt-Fishwick union is here as a result of the long standing deep-seated revolt against the Lewis rule of corruption, betrayal and destruction. Had the Left wing, under direction of the official Communist Party, not completely forfeited its mass leadership by a series of fatal blunders, this revolt, now temporarily retarded, could have been continued in its once adopted direction—definitely toward the Left. It could thus have become decisive for the course in the anthracite as well.

As far as the two union leaderships are concerned it has quite clearly been a contest for spoils coming with official positions from which their conflict grew and swung in one section, the Fishwick group, over to the side of endeavoring to take advantage of the mass revolt. Is there any point of division of policies in its decisive aspect, that is, in attitude towards the operators? The records of both the Lewis and Fishwick groups are already well known. They have been identically treasonable to the rank and file and there have been no statements or proclamations showing any departure from or any difference on this score. There have, however, been statements for unity of the two unions. A unity which could be accomplished only on the basis of division of spoils of position by both cliques and to the further loss of the rank and file. For the coal miners it can at least be certain that there would be no future union progress that way.

Where is Howatt Going?

It should always be borne in mind that the bulk of leadership of the new union is furnished by the Fishwick group which throughout its history has been part and parcel of all the crimes of the sell-out breaking down of working standards and union destruction carried on by the Lewis machine. The background of Howatt, and a few with him, is quite a different one. But judging by the present position there could be but scant hopes for the future to show a revival of their past. Their present route of travel is decisive and when concerning a union leader it becomes one for the rank and file to take serious note of.

The fight made by Howatt against the Kansas Industrial Court law is one of the few bright pages of American labor history. His fight during a number of years, up until his expulsion from the old union, against the Lewis corruption and betrayals added favorable weight to his record. His struggle for reinstatement into the union was a correct tactical position; but with that reinstatement the turn to the right began. He failed to renew his fight and to give any support whatever to the revolt which became particularly widespread during the period of defeat of the Pennsylvania-Ohio strike and found its expression in the "Save the Union Movement". He failed to support its further development in the organization of the National Miners Union. Regardless of the mistakes in development and weaknesses inherent in the N.M.U. from its inception, true progressives could not fail to support it. Howatt instead later chose to join with the corrupt Fishwick group.

At the convention forming the new union at Springfield Illinois, Howatt failed to fight against the seating of Farrington who so completely personified the agent of the coal operators in the union ranks. Honest delegates from the ranks had come there determined to fight and root out all vestiges of the Lewis wrecking machine, embodied as fully in the Fishwick group. They found in their former ally Howatt, now an opponent. Referring to them Howatt made the outrageous charge that, "a few delegates to the convention have been

bought out by Lewis". The adoption of constitutional clauses barring Communists from membership and classifying them with the reactionary Civic Federation and Ku Klux Klan met no opposition from Howatt, instead he joined in red-bating. Yet the most decisive is the attitude towards the increased exploitation by the operators. And here the friendly "co-operation" can lead to no other career than the one so "successfully" pursued by Lewis.

Preying Upon Miners' Momentary Passivity

The squabble on the appeal against the injunction, now begun in the operator controlled court at Springfield, is expected to last until late in the fall. This has become one means of holding the general membership resentment against both the cliques in abeyance and retarding its development. But enormous bills, no matter whom the operators favor in this tilt, will be due for payment by this membership and perhaps help blow the lid off again.

Throughout the fields the coal miners are suffering under the crushing weight of unemployment constantly increasing by the advancing machine loading and mechanical mining. The major soft coal fields in Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky and other places are entirely without a union and with all gains of the past wiped out. Many bitter disappointments have been experienced. A certain degree of exhaustion in addition to the general more important effects of the economic crisis has engendered in the miners a state of momentary passivity though isolated spontaneous strikes have taken place.

Fatal Blunders of the Left Wing Result in Isolation

Yet the problem in the mine field remains the building of a union which will embrace all coal miners and adopt the policy of militant struggle. What does the official Communist Party policy contribute to a solution of this problem? A big insurgent movement has just taken place growing out of discontent with the reactionary policies of the old officialdom. It was the first insurgency in the A. F. of L. for a long time taking place in a basic industry and important union with a generally favorable basis for the Left. Yet it did not lend strength to the Left wing at all. On the contrary, the main benefits went to social reformism. The N.M.U. is practically extinct. Its convention first scheduled for April first, then postponed to June 1, has now again seemingly been postponed to June 28th—or will there be none? What becomes of responsibility to the working class and to the miners in particular who did follow the Left wing?

The meaningless hurling of extravagant phrases of fascism and "social fascism", coming from the top, can be no substitute for correct policies and only confuses the situation, to put it mildly. Down among the ranks the small scattered Left wing groups, still existing, become footballs for either of the two old cliques. A continuation of this inevitably brings further isolation by members of these groups becoming compelled, in order to get a job, to rejoin either of the two unions having control without any policy of carrying on Left wing and progressive activities within.

Two main reasons for this isolation are easily discernible. Progressive elements who in the past became allies of the Left wing movement and should have been properly utilized as bridges to the masses were instead, during the period of right opportunist policies of the Party elevated to leadership. Hence they are now still able to maintain a commanding position while travelling definitely toward the Right. Secondly, the failure of the N.M.U., not caused by unfavorable objective conditions but by repeated mistakes of policy during the Communist Party's present course of opportunist adventurism.

From the Daily Worker (6-13-1930), in an article commenting upon the anthracite convention we notice somewhat of a turn at least toward a half recognition of the necessity of the Left wing working within the existing unions. This, partial though it is, is to be welcomed. But how can such turns become effective and clear to the workers without an explanation of the mistakes of the opposite direction, as for example, calling upon the progressive miners to stay away from the Springfield convention of revolt against Lewis. Precisely at that place was where all Left wing and progressives should have been to continue

the fight against the reactionaries of all shades.

Left Wing Must Return to Fundamental Task

The problem of building a new union, we repeat still remains. And while a certain amount of passivity amongst the miners is prevalent, while they have been put on the defensive, opportunities are available. Perhaps nowhere better than in the unorganized fields for extension of organization and Left wing ideology, for building a union with militant policies. The additional fact that masses were set into motion through the recent revolt, as well as the course this motion has followed, must be properly evaluated. If it proves anything, above all it proves the necessity of the Left wing again adopting its fundamental task, that is, as the means of building one union, take up the indispensable work of organizing and extending its influence for a fighting program within the existing unions. In such fields as Illinois, Kansas and the anthracite there should be no doubt that the proper course is to organize the Left wing within the two unions having control to build the united front from below for the demands of the Left which correspond to the needs of the miners and thus to compel a united struggle with the N.M.U. where it functions.

To this end reinstatement of formerly expelled union opposition members must be taken up as a definite policy. A policy which guarantees the continuation and organization of the fight.

The field is ripe for such tactics. The rank and file will soon learn through experience to correctly estimate the position of the "progressives" now progressing toward the Right and one of the big tasks of the Left wing is to build and broaden the union with the masses, take advantage of the conflicts between the reactionary and opportunist leaders in a manner more effectively to expose them and win the influence of the masses for its program.

«Revolutionary Age» Barred from Mails

The denial of the mails by the Federal Government to the Revolutionary Age, organ of the Right wing (Lovestone-Gitlow) group in the Communist movement on the ground of "seditious" and "indecent" contents is an act which the entire working class movement must protest. At the same time they must emphatically demand the restoration of second class mailing privileges for the Revolutionary Age.

This high-handed act of the Post Office Department is a revival of the ugly Burleson-Wilson war days, and, if allowed to stand, is a lever to smash the press and organizations of the workers at the incitation of the government. Not for years has such an attempt been made. The U.S. Government has devised a pretext for the suppression of this organ. It can find like excuses for action against the Militant Daily Worker and other of the working class and revolutionary press.

The workers under capitalism have every reason and need to fight to maintain and extend so-called civil rights—free press, free speech and assemblage, the right for the workers to organize, etc. These are fundamental needs of agitation, propaganda and organization and can only be maintained through constant vigilance and struggle by the workers against the employers and capitalist government. A blow against one is a blow against all. It is in this light that the government's attack on the Revolutionary Age must be understood.

The Communist movement in the United States is unfortunately at the present time engaged in such a deep-going internal struggle that the Government conceives it can attack it with greater impunity. The three currents in the Communist Party are each represented by a separate organ. Up to now the Daily Worker, the organ of the Centrist Stalin faction which speaks officially for the Party, has maintained the silence of the deep on the victimization of the Revolutionary Age. To adopt an attitude of such unscrupulous factionalism (incidentally characteristic of the Daily Worker for a considerable time) is anything but revolutionary. It is unprincipled. Every worker must protest against the attack on the press of the workers, whatever faction in the Party they belong to.