

# The A. F. of L. Convention and the November Election

By MAX SHACHTMAN

Two recent events, separated by less than a month, furnish us with aspects in different fields of the position of the American working class. They are the "golden jubilee" convention of the American Federation of Labor in Boston and the national elections just concluded.

## The A. F. of L. Convention

It has become a commonplace to say of the former that it was "one of the most reactionary assemblages in its history." That trait, indeed, has come to be taken with an almost fatalistic certainty. The Boston convention did not seem to be illuminated with the faintest ray of light. The petty bourgeoisie and big bourgeoisie that dominated the A. F. of L. and its convention, its spokesmen who ranged from the principal executive of the American capitalist class, Hoover, to its scarcely concealed agent, Green, ruled the convention in dead-black serenity. The burning problems of the working class, crying out for solution, were either entirely ignored or else treated with a cold, dead hand.

Less than three out of the approximately forty millions of workers are organized into the A. F. of L. It is to the direct interests of the organized workers, and corresponds to the desire of the more conscious among them, to draw the other millions into the trade union movement, so that—even from the narrow standpoint of the trade unionist—the "bargaining power" of labor is increased. Two years ago, the New Orleans convention of the A. F. of L., walled in between the demand for organizing the unorganized that proceeded from within the unions and the work that was begun independently by the Left wing from the outside, issued the slogan of "double the membership," just as the Detroit convention before it issued the slogan of organizing the automobile industry. The history of this "campaign" is completed in two sentences: The Toronto convention repeated the "double the membership" slogan. The Boston convention tacitly attended the funeral where even its name was not mentioned. In place of the new forces from the immense reservoir of unorganized that has only to be tapped in order to flow torrentially, the convention had a new decline in membership to record.

Increasing millions of workers are unemployed in the country, suffering intense misery, starving in the golden storehouse of the world like Tantalus, surrounded by food and unable to avail himself of it. The debates on the subject of unemployment and relief were like the droning of monks cut off from the real world without. The only loud voices raised were those of the reactionaries who, like Green, considered it preferable for the workers to starve in the streets, than for them to want even that pitiful, bureaucratic social insurance that the liberals advocate as a sedative for social unrest. Thoughtful members of the capitalist class—more concerned with their own interests, to be sure, than with relieving working class misery—are looking with approval at some mild form of insurance, but not the hierarchy of the A. F. of L. Like the servile footman, the Greens are more concerned for the interests of their master than the master himself.

To bring out more distinctly the reactionary pall hanging over the convention, the "progressives" can be mentioned. Timid and pitiful though their bleating protests may have been—and they were worse than that—the manner in which even their supplicating and thoroughly respectful speeches and proposals were received (they might have been made in the arid deserts of Africa for all the attention they got in Boston) only emphasized the iron rule of the Greens, Lewises, Wolls and Hutchesons. And why should the barons of the A. F. of L. treat these people with less contempt? They occupy a miserable post akin to the Russian czar's "official Jew", the Hof Jude who was kept at court to show that the emperor was not an anti-semiter.

What the whole situation demanded from one with the pretentious title of "progressive" was a vigorous denunciation of the whole bureaucracy and its system i. e., of capitalism and those who serve it in the labor movement. But when the "progressives" bear names like Zaritsky, whose claim to trade union leadership rest principally upon collaboration with the hat manufacturers and persecution of the Left wing minorities in his union, it would be asking for too much.

Despite all these features, which combine to produce the even monotony of con-

stantly deepening reaction at every year's convention, there are valuable aspects to this convention which crown the period that preceded it.

## Labor's Dissatisfaction

A restlessness and discontentment is permeating the American working class. It is beginning to awaken from the luxuriant dream of the prosperity days. It is not only feeling the scourge of unemployment, but the radical lowering of its living standards in a dozen different forms: wage cuts, lengthening of the working day, intensification of labor, "stagger systems" and the like. Directing the hostility at the boss, it also commences to discern behind the capitalist government the hazy figure of the capitalist class. In a word, the premises are present for the development of a clear class consciousness among the workers.

The bureaucracy of the A. F. of L., and its whole conservative machinery, are pillars of American imperialism—more visible today than ever. Without them, the security of the ruling class would be considerably diminished. The function of the bureaucracy is to prevent the workers from understanding the class nature of the government. That this function is being exercised by Green and Co. with more energy today than for many years past, speaks loudly for their fear of an imminent awakening of the American workers as a class, the consummation of which would be a landmark in revolutionary progress.

Thirteen years ago, the capitalist class required the solid support of the working class for the imperialist slaughter. It needed the official labor movement as a bulwark against the Red menace presented by the militant socialist and I. W. W. opposition to the war. It therefore took the unusual step of sending Woodrow Wilson to an A. F. of L. convention to enlist labor. In 1930, it needs its docile acquiescence because the crisis is to be "solved" at the expense of the workers. It needs the A. F. of L. more than ever as a barricade against the new Red menace of the Communist movement. It therefore recurs to the unusual step of sending a president to give a public demonstration of the unity of the official labor movement and the capitalist government. Hoover's speaking at the Boston meeting was not a sign of the confidence the capitalist class feels, but of its uneasiness.

## The A. F. of L. Decline

There is an even more interesting phase of the A. F. of L.'s development, which is quite without precedent. Since it was organized in 1881, it has reflected, with greater or lesser accuracy, the alternating periods of boom and crisis. With virtually no deviation, it increased its membership with every economic rise (1889, 1899-1903, 1905-1908, 1911, 1913, 1915-1920) and declined precipitately with every depression or crisis. The depression commencing in 1920, found it at its un-repeated height: 4,078,740 members. With the crisis it declined to 2,865,799 in 1924. But the period of prosperity that followed, absolutely unprecedented in modern times, far from resulting in a growth of membership, actually shows a persistent decline that has continued to this moment—throughout the prosperity, down to the present crisis! The decline continued at the Boston convention, for while a formal increase of 27,000 members was recorded both this "increase" and the real loss are accounted for by the calm report of the U. M. W. A., made by Lewis without batting an eyelash in which 400,000 members were claimed (when there are actually less than 100,000 miners in the Lewis union).

How is this record, which breaks with previous, allegedly "historical" precedents, to be explained?

American imperialism emerged from the war, from the post-war domestic crisis and the revolutionary crises of Europe, not only as a first-rate world power, but as the first world power. Its frenzied expansion after 1924 was an expansion beyond its boundaries. Its wealth and power rested, and still rests upon its dominant position in world economy. One may say that the relationship of the international working class was to the American working class as a whole what the relationship of the unskilled American worker is to the American labor aristocrat. American imperialism was enabled—for the first time on such a scale—to sustain a broad labor

aristocracy. The rise in the standard of living of this section of the workers, which counted millions in its ranks, was, so to speak, "granted without a struggle" by a bloated capitalist class. Unlike previous periods, labor's economic improvements were not squeezed out through the intermediary of the trade unions. With a "satisfied" working class at home, the fabulous super-profits extorted by American imperialism from the rest of the world, not only made these improvements possible but even profitable.

## The Fall of the Strike Curve

This view is confirmed by the index of strike activities. Previous periods of prosperity and trade union growth have almost always been characterized by an increase in the number of strikes and strikers. The last period of prosperity and of improved workers' economic conditions showed a directly opposite process: strikes and strikers have been almost uninterruptedly on the decline not only from 1920 but from 1924. To use the figures of the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, repeated recently by the Standard American Corporation, we get the following table (Strike column includes lookouts):

Year	Strikes	Involved
1919	3,630	4,160,348
1920	3,411	1,463,054
1921	2,385	1,099,247
1922	1,112	1,612,562
1923	1,553	756,584
1924	1,249	654,641
1925	1,301	428,416
1926	1,025	329,592
1927	734	349,434
1928	629	357,145
1929	903	230,463

The current year shows a still further decline (about 40 percent less than the 1929 figure for the same months). And the tremendous unemployment attendant upon the present crisis does not indicate any increase in strike activity for the period immediately ahead.

From all that has been said above, it does not at all follow that the outlook for the American working class is so uniformly dark. It is an established fact that, especially in our time, apparently fixed precedents are broken, that the slow arithmetical progression of the working class is frequently interrupted either by abrupt geometric leaps or by retrogression. So far as the radicalization of the working class is concerned, the last half a decade has shown a retrogression on the whole. But this very past has prepared the grounds for a penetration of the revolutionary idea into the consciousness of the proletariat.

There is an enormous working class discontentment in the country. Thus far it is blind and mirdirected, that is, politically, it is safely canalized into the bourgeois parties this time the Democrats. The bulk of the working class voted against Hoover and his administration as the embodiment of the crisis and the unemployment. So rapidly do profound changes in economic and political life take place in our epoch, that it required only a brief two years to secure a repudiation of a government swept into power with the biggest vote on record. From 1928 to 1930, the turnover of votes amounted to upwards of 8,000,000 (the total of the Republican plurality in 1928 plus the Democratic plurality this year). Neither the Wilson administration but the disreputable Harding regime suffered so humiliating and rapid a defeat as did Hoover.

## What About Radicalization

But this discontentment is not yet a radicalization of the working class. So far as the latter was expressed politically, it was done largely through the tiny vote of the Communist Party (a bare doubling of the still smaller "prosperity" vote in 1928), to which should be added, of course, many thousands of disfranchised workers. But the results of the elections, plus the statistics of strike struggle—the two principal indices of working class radicalization—are a smashing blow at the monstrously exaggerated analyses of the Stalinists. Their contentions concerning the "mass upsurge of the American workers", the "widespread radicalization of the masses", "the workers following the Communist Party"—all these fall to the ground before the facts. To a moderate extent, the Left Opposition shared his error in the past. That is, it proceeded from the indisputable fact that the premises exist for a deep-going radi-

calization of the workers and drew the conclusions that the process was well under way. Closer examination and recent developments indicate that the pre-conditions for radicalization are even increasing, but the process is only at its elementary stage of development.

At what tempo will it proceed? What will be the extent of its sweep? Where will it end? That depends not only a series of economic factors, but in larger degree than is usually conceived, upon the ability of the revolutionists to take advantage of the premises in order to accelerate the process of radicalization.

There is no law compelling the working class of America to repeat the experiences of its own past or those of the European working class, at any rate, not for the same length of time. We live, as we have remarked, in an epoch of convulsions, developing jerkily and unevenly, replete with the breaking of precedents. All "precedent" showed that in this election there should have a large "third party" which, like the Greenbackers, the People's Party, the Progressive Party and the Labor Party movement of seven-eight years ago, would arise fatally on the basis of an economic crisis. But this "law" was violated: there was no real sign of a "third party" in the present elections. The dissatisfaction of the masses was almost wholly absorbed by the Democratic Party.

For many historical reasons, the American working class is a very violent one, and at the same time the least class conscious. With the whole atmosphere favorable for a swift development of this consciousness, what is mainly needed to achieve it is a Communist Party capable of seeing at what turn we find ourselves, and steering for the right road. But the Party leaders, who are really only approaching this road, conduct the Party and its policies as though the road were not only reached but already half-way travelled over. That is why we have one smash-up after another under the leadership of the "third period" specialists who cannot distinguish tomorrow from yesterday or today, and take the beginning of a process for its conclusion.

What is needed is a bold leadership, not a foolhardy or foolish one, with policies based on realities and not fantasies. Such a leadership could liquidate the liquidators of the Right wing without great difficulties, for it would oppose to the latter's policies those Bolshevik policies that produce successes and not the defeats that the Right wing feeds upon. The Lovestone group, recovering from its grudging and painful support to the program of organizing the unorganized into industrial unions under the leadership of the Left wing, has become bold enough to raise the slogan "back to the A. F. of L."—its "clever" way of proposing an end to this "foolish business" of the new unions. Without wasting time arguing with the Right wing over the need of winning—from within—the A. F. of L. workers (a need which we, at least, take for granted), the Communist movement must proceed with the consolidation of the new unions, which have a tremendous future and great vitality, and all the conditions for which still exist. It is hardly necessary to emphasize here that we do not withdraw a syllable of our criticism of the Stalinists who, by their conduct in the Left wing unions, have done incalculable harm to the new movement. But even they have been unable to destroy it or its possibilities.

## The Place of the Left Opposition

What is needed is a leadership capable of strengthening the Party, not keeping it stagnant or weakening it. What the present Party leadership does is to broaden the base for reformism and not for revolution: that is, its policies help to alienate the awakening workers from Communism and to drive them into the socialist or syndicalist camp. Out of the present Party leadership, which is thoroughly corrupted by Stalinism, no fundamental progress can be expected. That must proceed from the ranks of the Party and the Left wing around it, a process that the Left Opposition is helping to accelerate by building its own ranks and organizing the Bolshevik faction within the Party itself. Our struggle is inextricably bound up with the whole question of the path of the American working class, the question raised anew by the two events we have discussed: the revolutionary road or the reformist. Our victory is one guarantee that it will tread the former.