

The Railroad Brotherhoods Meet

By ARNE SWABECK

Recently two events, little known and little noticed, have rendered splendid proof of increasing unemployment pressure by the rank and file, at least within certain sections of the trade union movement, to the point where some officials have felt compelled to endeavor to get into some sort of motion so as to stave off what they consider "something worse." They have, of course, been entirely overshadowed by the din of the noisy charity campaigns to which capitalism has resorted in every city. But they grew from the same cause, the unemployment crisis, and likewise materialized because of the fear of real working class action.

The Railroad Conference

The first event was the national conference of some seven hundred general chairmen and executive officers of the five railroad transportation brotherhoods, the Engineers, Firemen, Conductors, Trainmen and Switchmen, convening in Chicago on Nov. 12 at the fashionable Palmer House, in the gorgeous main ball room, for a two weeks' session to consider the six-hour day. The second event was the meeting of the Chicago Federation of Labor, Nov. 16th, adopting a resolution for the shorter workday for all federal employees.

The Palmer House gathering had a good proportion of paid officials, though some were specially elected delegates, more than fifty per cent being actual workers. It came about entirely as a result of the growing pressure from below, from among the railroad workers for relief in the present heavy unemployment situation. At the inception, the conference selected a committee of 25, representing equally all the five trades present, to work out a program of action. This committee submitted a majority and a minority report. The majority report, which is most significant, recommended a campaign for the six-hour day, without any reduction in the day's pay, to be obtained by all organizational measures possible, the not the strike weapon. It had the backing of the Firemen, Trainmen and Switchmen. But during the days of sharp debate the representatives of the Engineers and Conductors absolutely refused to go along with this program and instead backed the minority report which provided for a request that President Hoover call the railroad executives, financiers, and bondholders together and endeavor to have them stop their present drastic retrenchment and lay-off policy.

Meanwhile, the Chicago Tribune appeared with editorials paying some pious attention to the stress of the railroad workers but admonishing them not to help tax the industry out of business and thus "kill the goose that lays the golden eggs." The railroad executives also managed, opportunely enough, to make their big splurge about an allegedly new policy of "maintaining and expanding" present employment on the roads, which will eventually turn into the opposite, like all the other "golden" promises. Evidently it helped. On the last day of the conference the five brotherhood presidents, always eager for a compromise and the eradication of class lines, threw themselves into the breach of the sharp differences, proposing that all agree to unite on first trying out the minority plan of appeal to Hoover before the majority project of eventual strike is to be further considered. It carried.

The resolution adopted by the Chicago Federation of Labor states that industry is paralyzed, commerce is bankrupt, unemployment is growing due to increased mass production, a situation which can be met only by the palliative measure of reduction of working hours without reduction in the standard of living. It calls attention to the more than one million federal employees working as high as twelve hours a day and places this as a direct government responsibility. From this it proceeds to petition the A. F. of L. to urge President Hoover to proclaim the shorter workday and shorter work week in all governmental employment, national, state and local, adding that this is not a radical measure

but a "hope to inspire confidence in government, respect for law," etc.

"The Capitalist System is Shot"

The animated discussion, lasting a whole session, brought out much sharp criticism of the utter failure of the A. F. of L. executives, conservative delegates exclaiming: "The capitalist system is shot, if we don't do something, somebody else will." Others piped up: "Yes, now we are all radicals and revolutionists" but put heavy emphasis on labor party ballots. Throughout, a sharp undercurrent of pressure, with its reaction, some cunningly contemplating, others merely hesitant, some willingly, but above all a fear of real working class action.

What the actual results will be of the railroaders appeal or of an A. F. of L. request to Hoover for either proposals need not be the least in doubt. Designed purely to prevent what has been named "something worse", it will mean for those workers who may cherish hopes, only new disappointments, but also added experience. Nevertheless, these manifestations of pressure of discontent from the masses and the slight response, no matter what the motive or design of the latter, is significant. It points but further to the beginning of the upward curve of working class struggle in the United States. It also propounds again, rather forcefully, the question of just what part can and must the demand for a shorter workday without reduction in pay play in revolutionary unemployment tactics.

It is imperative that the tactics of the revolutionary forces at all times correspond closely to the level and to every

stage of development of objective conditions, and be in harmony with the readings of the subjective factors, becoming sharper and bolder with the rise of the level. In this instance, it means the development of the economic crisis and the readiness for struggle of the working class in general and its unemployed section in particular. The curve has been continually downward. The crisis has moved step by step to greater severity, greater unemployment and, at the end of 1930, is still moving in that direction. Unquestionably, general discontent is spreading among the working masses suffering the wants of unemployment with wage cuts and more speed-up for those having jobs. No let up in the capitalist offensive but the workers' discontent so far expressed, in its political sense, is chiefly in the "stupendous" step from the republican to the democratic party. These demands for the shorter workday without reduction in pay are the early signs of their pressure showing concrete manifestations.

The Party's Tactics

The exact opposite of corresponding with these developments have been the unemployment tactics pursued by the Communist Party leadership. It started from the top and coming downward, not increasing in boldness or sharpening its line, but modifying it, turning to the Right and losing its revolutionary basis. The very beginning was made with the organization of unemployment councils—without preparations, without mass propaganda, without mass basis but voluminous in demands. Next came the concentration on the social insurance bill (purely a parliamentary proposal, of the kind which will most likely not even reach parliament and thus at

Lessons of the Marine Workers Union Struggle

The developments in the Marine Workers Industrial Union are an instructive lesson in the incalculable harm that can be brought upon the revolutionary trade union movement by a policy and administration of bureaucratic Centrism in the Party, which inevitably exerts its devastating influence upon the Left wing unions. These injuries react upon the Party and upon the movement as a whole. For years now the Centrists have been squandering the capital accumulated by the revolutionary leadership of the early years of the Communist International. More than that, they have been drawing heavily on the future, and even the regenerated movement, purged of the Centrist bureaucracy and its treacherous policy, will be a long time restoring its prestige and repairing the damage done.

The events in the Marine Workers Industrial Union are mainly a repetition of what took place before in other unions under Stalinist direction, with the difference that they were longer in coming to a head and therefore more violent in their explosion. They brought out into clear relief the effects implicit in the situation in all the other unions. The adherents of the Left Opposition in the M. W. I. U. sought from the very outset to keep the revolt of the rank and file militants in Communist channels, and to direct it to the advantage of the revolutionary movement undermined by the bureaucrats. The task was rendered doubly difficult by the provocations of the officialdom and the machinations of the Right wing liquidators who, here as always, fasten themselves on to the reactionary prejudices in the workers' ranks.

The Warnings of the Opposition

Almost a year ago, in writing on the bureaucratic course in the National Miners Union, we warned that one of its dangers would be a recrudescence of syndicalism. "If syndicalism (that is, anti-political party; anti-political action; belief in the labor union as the all-sufficing instrument of the working class) is the punishment meted out to the revolutionary movement for the sins of party opportunism and vulgar parliamentarism, it is also one of the ways in which workers frequently repay

the workers' political party for mismanagement and for dominating the trade union with the rigidity, bureaucratic arbitrariness, mechanical and formalistic transference of the party into the union which is typical of Stalinism. We warned about such an eventuality months ago in our comments on the Belleville conference. The sudden spread of erroneous syndicalist conceptions among the Illinois miners may be put entirely at the door of the Party bureaucrats." (*Militant*, March 1, 1930.)

Anarcho-syndicalism, Lenin justly observed, is the twin brother of opportunism. At the same time it is the price the Communist movement must pay for opportunist policies and the abuse of Party authority. This phenomenon is revealed classically in the M. W. I. U. The danger was implicit in the whole situation, and what we wrote in the foreword to the "Rank and File Marine Workers' Statement" published a month ago in the *Militant*, was but a restatement of what we had said many times in conferences with the proletarian Opposition in the Union. In every discussion with them, we insisted that Stalinist Centrism cannot be answered by the reactionary and bankrupt dogmas of anarcho-syndicalism. Our aim was to drive the legitimate protest of the Communist and Left wing workers deeper into the Party and the Union. We insisted on an appeal against expulsion by the Party bureaucrats, an appeal to the Party workers, a resistance to the last of expulsion from the Union, to carry the fight to the last ditch in the organization so as to strengthen its unity on the basis of a correct policy. In short, we stood for a Communist fight against the Centrist bureaucracy.

The Reactionary Role of the Right Wing

At this point the provocations of the bureaucrats were grist to the mill of unprincipled and treacherous elements which calculated upon diverting a number of workers in the Opposition from the path of Communism into the stagnant backwaters of syndicalism. The manoeuvres of the Lovestone adventurers, also facilitated the aspirations of the reactionary syndicalist elements.

best be able to move workers only toward a social reformist direction). The third step has now been reached in the complacent settling down to collecting signatures for this bill.

The mass propaganda, which should have preceded organization, was neglected. The councils did not grow out of a movement, did not represent the unemployed, could not gain their adherence and have remained for all practical purposes almost non-existent. The party proceeded from the premise, of a "revolutionary upsurge of the American working masses" and was stunned by the Democratic landslide. Will it now jump back and endeavor to fill the gap; when there should be a sharpening of its line and a greater balance?

Much of the necessary mass propaganda and preparation must still be done. Correct issues, demands and slogans are still to be formulated and undoubtedly the demand for the six-hour day with no reduction in pay can become a powerful lever to help set the masses into motion. A concentrated propaganda campaign now could soon lead to the organizational steps and become real preparations for the coming stage of working class offensive.

It is well, in this connection, to remember the great movement for the eight-hour day of the Eighties. Following upon a decade of unexampled growth and expansion of industry and immediately upon the heels of a severe economic crisis—very similar to the present moment—it became a sharp offensive struggle immensely advancing the working class movement of those days. The Chicago revolutionists, the Haymarket martyrs—commonly dubbed anarchists—showed their ability to turn this eight-hour day demand into something more than just a reform measure. They gave it militant content and made it an integral part of the general struggle against the capitalist system.

There is much for us to learn from this.

How characteristic it is that the Party and Union bureaucrats made no attempt to answer the just and legitimate criticisms and grievances of the rank and file Opposition! On the contrary, hiding their own blunders and protecting their own puppets, they launched the standardized campaign of abuse and slander against the workers.

Lenin did not fight syndicalism by venomous attacks upon the workers who had fallen victim to this inverted phase of opportunism. Instead, he hit ten times harder at the opportunists whose crimes and stupidities were responsible for the manifestations. The tactics pursued by the Party and Union bureaucracy played the game of precisely those elements who sought to alienate the Communist workers from the Communist movement and draw them into a sterile, anti-Communist sect. And who are these elements? Aping the slogans of the Gompers school, they raised the cry of "no politics in the union", meaning thereby no revolutionary politics. They are people who, aspiring to leadership themselves, raised the cry of "no leaders whatever," in order to protect themselves from competition.

But such slogans did not prevent these elements from shady dickerings with the Right wing adventurers, and even other groups less savory, and this, in turn, did not prevent Lovestone from exploiting these reactionary sentiments to combat the efforts of the Left Opposition to hold the movement to a Communist road. Like their brothers-in-arms of the French Right wing, Lovestone & Co. leaped at the opportunity of making common cause with anarcho-syndicalist elements to fight against Communism and the Communist Party.

The False Tactics of the Syndicalists

The Left Opposition was obliged to break with the elements following such a course. We are in no sense interested in forming a united front of everybody against Communism. On the contrary, we aimed to unite the revolutionary workers for a fight to regenerate the Communist and Left wing movement, and thereby to strengthen the unity and resources of the Union. We disagree profoundly and give no support whatsoever.

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