

Towards the New York Dressmakers Strike

By SYLVIA BLEEKER

The call for the dressmakers' strike of New York is about to be issued. Although it is to be a strike of only one branch of the industry it is nevertheless of concern to all needle trades workers. The conditions of work prevailing at present are practically the same in every branch: fierce exploitation through the piece work system, constant reduction of wages and the complete abandonment of regular hours. To be able to pull through in any way, with the existing standards, the needle trade workers in many cases work seven days a week besides putting in long hours. While the cost of living has been reduced somewhat here and there, wages have declined from 25 to 50 percent. The situation varies very little in the different branches of the trade.

The Assault of the Bosses

The onslaught of the bosses against the standards of the needle trades workers is assuming phenomenal proportions. In the completely unorganized shops, the bosses proceed with a general slashing of wages, cutting down the earnings of the workers to the very rock bottom, meeting with practically no resistance. In the shops under control of the Right wing union, the bosses have the tacit support of the administration in the wage cutting campaign. The Right wing betrayers help the bosses pacify the workers, subdue their spirit of resistance, utilizing the control over the membership and the apparatus of the union as a profit-raising machine for the bosses and against the workers.

The most fundamental principles of unionism have been wiped out and replaced by open hand-in-glove work with the bosses. This class collaboration policy is threatening to destroy the last vestige of power of the organized needle worker and stall off the organization of the unorganized further and further. The needle trade workers, especially the class conscious ones, cannot and must not allow these conditions to continue. We must call a halt, and that without delay.

The strike of the dressmakers, being called by the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union, must become a rallying point for all needle trade workers in their fight against the bosses for better conditions, for shortest hours, for week work, against the "stagger system", against the class collaboration policy of the Right wing officialdom, against terror in the unions, and for the organization of the unorganized. The economic interests of the workers, organized and unorganized, are identical. The economic interests of the workers in the N. T. W. I. U. are just the same as those of the workers who, because of job control, are at present in the Right wing union. Even the working conditions of the two groups of workers do not differ to any degree and their needs are identical.

This identity of interests of the needle workers in the Industrial Union and in the Right wing International must become clear to all workers, and should be the guide for a common struggle against the bosses. The fact that for the present or even for some time in the future, these workers are divided in their union affiliation, must not for one moment befog their common aim. Those workers who are fighting under the banner of the N. T. W. I. U., being the most advanced section of the needle workers, must continuously and tirelessly work in the direction of helping the workers in the Right wing unions free themselves from the yoke of the treacherous bureaucracy. Our isolation up till now has only helped the International to spread the notion among its workers that the Industrial Union exists "only for politics". Such propaganda can be eradicated only through persistent work in building the Industrial Union as a militant organization, as well as through a fighting group in the International for the interests of the thousands of needle workers there. The sooner we do that the sooner will we separate the needle workers from their reformist leadership.

Party Policy and Ours

The policy of the N. T. W. I. U. in relation to the workers in the International, which has been changed somewhat under the pressure of the Opposition's criticism, has led the workers to confusion and isolation. By calling the broad masses of the needle trade workers by the same name as their bureaucratic leadership, by classifying these workers in the same group as their yellow socialist leaders, the Industrial Union only put up a barrier between these two groups of needle workers. It is this isolation policy that was the cause of the lack of organization and resistance on the part of the workers in the International against the betrayals of the Schlesinger officialdom. Even now, when the trade union

policy of the party has been changed, the attitude and approach to the Right wing membership is still erroneous. In essence, the changed policy must be a call to the worker of the needle trades, regardless of their union affiliation, for a common struggle against their class enemies, the bosses, and their reformist agents. The two-front policy proposed by the Communist League (Opposition) was originally rejected and condemned. We said, "What is needed is a two-sided policy of strengthening the new Union and simultaneously working within the old Unions, with a single objective: to unite the workers on a broader basis under the Left wing banner. . . . To liquidate the new unions would mean to deprive the workers of the concentrated gains of their long struggle and paralyze their fighting power for a long time.

The Lack of Preparation

Up to, now, the preparations for the dress strike have not been much to speak of, to put it mildly. Since the last conference in June 1930, there were only phrases, but no organizational preparation. The famous theory that all workers of the A. F. of L. unions are "social fascists" made it impossible for the Industrial Union to organize opposition groups in the International and raise the sentiment for the strike. Leaflets, open forums, are essential, but cannot take the place of direct and definite organization. The making of contacts in the open and Right wing shops has been conducted in a loose manner, with very obviously meager results. Due to the mechanical discussion at the various meetings of the union, the interest of our membership is not sufficiently deep-going. This has been demonstrated by the small attendance from the shops controlled by the Industrial Union to the dress conferences, and by the shop

delegates' council meetings. The machinery of the strike now, about two weeks before the call is to be issued, has not as yet been organized, constituted and put into a workable body. When is all this to be done—this puzzles every needle trades worker. Such fraternal organizations as the Workmen's Circle, the Independent Workmen's Circle, and a number of other labor fraternal organizations, were not asked to support the strike. The reason given for this attitude by the leadership until opposition comrades in the strike committee made the proposal, was that they are bosses' organizations, and that the International Workers Order has the jurisdiction in this field.

Of course, this policy of the Communist party for the trade unions is thoroughly wrong. By maintaining this policy, the Communist party is only aping the reactionary A. F. of L. which recognizes no "dual" organizations regardless of their position, strength and effectiveness. This policy is only a remnant of the preceding isolation course of the party, which considered every worker not a direct supporter of the party a "social fascist" or worse. There are certainly many honest workers in these organizations and they must be appealed to, to show their solidarity with the dress strikers.

What Should Be Done?

To insure a favorable outcome of this strike we must immediately intensify the organization within the Right wing unions and rally the workers around the call for the dress strike. We must appeal for aid to all labor and fraternal organizations without exception and urge the membership to exert pressure upon their officialdom to make the strike of the dressmakers the fight of all the workers, so that the strike successful at the present crisis will have a far-reaching effect on all the workers. Speakers for all our meetings should come from

The Strike -- As We Go to Press

Since the article by comrade Bleeker was written, and just as we go to press, we have received the following information:

At the party needle trades fraction meeting on January 29, 1931, with Amter in the chair, Foster, Johnstone, Stachel and other party leaders present, and under their pressure, it was decided to change the whole basis of the coming dressmakers' strike. Instead of a strike for the economic demands of the workers in the trade (hours, wages and conditions), the decision was adopted to conduct the strike SOLELY on the basis of a struggle for the "recognition of the union." This marks a distinctly backward step, which robs the whole proposed strike of its genuine significance. At the present time, when the main task must be the strengthening of the Industrial Union in the face of the severe onslaughts of the bosses upon the dressmakers' conditions, a strike merely for "recognition" makes it virtually impossible to draw into the struggle the thousands of workers who are unorganized or in the Right wing union. It is always the policy of the labor lieutenants of capitalism in control of the A. F. of L. to conduct strikes purely for recognition from the bosses, and not for the amelioration of the workers' conditions. The Left wing cannot and must not follow this road.

What is behind this overnight change of policy. First, a belated recognition by the party bureaucrats that the preparations for the strike have been grossly insufficient up to now. Second, the idea of making a dicker behind the scenes with one section of the bosses, those with whom the Industrial Union already has an agreement, for the re-adoption of this agreement—denuding

the strike of its real objective and of all militancy.

The Left wing militants must bear this in mind: Under present conditions a strike for "recognition of the Industrial Union" will not move the non-Industrial Union members to struggle. The demand is an abstract one unless it is bound up with the struggle for economic conditions. Workers join in struggle for the improvement of their conditions and only under that banner, and not for an abstraction.

What does the Left Opposition propose at present? The point of view expressed in comrade Bleeker's article remains entirely correct. If a strike is called, it must be called on the basis of the conditions of the workers and their improvement, and with adequate preparations and a correct approach to the majority of the workers who do not yet follow the Left wing. If it is proposed to call a strike merely for "recognition"—the strike will be devoid of its real objective, for which the party bureaucrats will bear the full responsibility. Rather than such a "strike", we propose that the present strike committee be reformed into AN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITTEE with a campaign worked out to lay the ground solidly for a real strike in the future. These are the proposals which the Left wing as a whole must adopt.

It goes without saying that regardless of what steps are taken by the Industrial Union, the Left Opposition will be found fighting on the side of the Left wing and in the very front ranks. Our interests are theirs; their struggle is ours.

We shall return to this question in greater detail in the next issue.

the working class movement, and we must make an effort to get all those who definitely support the strike. All workers, members of our union, should be drawn into activities regardless of their political opinions. Regular and systematic shop meetings must be called of all the connections that we have made so far in the Right wing and non-union shops, to discuss their grievances and bring them to a head at the time of the strike call. Every shop controlled by the Industrial Union should spare one or more members for colonization in non-union and Right wing shops. The strike committee must begin to function properly by assuming its legitimate functions immediately. We cannot delay the perfection of this apparatus. All members with experience in strikes and willing to be active, should be drawn into the work. The conference in preparation for Jan. 31, must work in the direction of sending out a call to the I. L. G. W. U. demanding from them not to see the machinery of the union to scab on the dressmakers, and call upon the workers there to exert pressure upon the officialdom—and join the ranks of the strikers. The strike of the dressmakers should become the focal point around which the issues of the needle workers will be crystallized and a definite Left wing organized in the Right wing unions will emerge. To this end, every class conscious worker must strive. We must try to make up for the criminal lack of preparation by our devoted work. Our tireless and whole-hearted participation must become the backbone of the dressmakers in their fight against the bosses. The Communist League of America (Opposition) calls upon all its members, its sympathizers and the needle trades workers in general to join the ranks of the striking dressmakers and help them carry it to a victorious conclusion. The dressmakers will pave the way for a militant fight of the rest of the needle workers against the greedy attacks of the manufacturers.

We stand with you, dressmakers, and will do all in our power to help you win the strike and build the Industrial Union.

GOLD ON THE SKIDS

From friends in France we learn:

At the recent international conference of the "revolutionary litterateurs" in Odessa, a most instructive episode broke the otherwise even calm of the proceedings. Not unexpectedly, the tumult centered around the noted "proletarian artist", Michael Gold, editor of the New Masses. In the course of the discussion, one of the American delegates, Kunitz, directed a few telling strictures at Gold, pointing out that the man was simply sliding fast to a comfortable bourgeois outlook and . . . existence. As we pointed out once in the Militant, Kunitz pointed out at the conference how the financial motif ran through all of Gold's work. Before Jack Robinson could be said, Gold simply upped and engaged in a fist-fight with Kunitz. The Russians, of course, took the side of Kunitz—not physically, but "ideologically". Gold's hints for a bit of subsidy, later on, were met with a cold statement: "Print the Masses on a mimeograph machine", he was advised. We cannot fully agree with this advice. We would like to know: why should it be printed at all?

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