

Who are the New «Progressive» Leaders in the A. F. of L. ?

By ARNE SWABECK

With his usual flair for punctuating a specific issue by a dramatic act, John L. Lewis has created a stir throughout the trade union movement in submitting his resignation from the A. F. of L. Executive Council.

Unusual importance is attached to this act. This is natural for more than one reason. John L. Lewis is identified as the leader of the new "progressive" bloc formed within the A. F. of L. upper crust and his resignation certainly tends to emphasize the hopeless division within the leadership. Much more important, however, is the additional and keen attention this act will focus upon the industrial union issue.

His resignation, to be correctly understood, must be viewed on the background of the recent A. F. of L. convention fight in which John L. Lewis, supported by Charles P. Howard, of the typographical union, together with Sidney Hillman and David Dubinsky of the needle trades and others, argued on the progressive side of some important questions. This fight in the main centered around the issues of the organization of the unorganized workers in the basic and mass production industries and their organization into industrial unions. The most hidebound craft unionists, led by William Green, Matthew Woll, Dan Tobin and John P. Frey, made up in voting strength what they lacked in convincing arguments and were thus able to carry the day, with the opposition, however, mustering imposing forces. Of course, this vote did not settle the issue. No sooner had the delegates left the gorgeous hotels and the beautiful shores of Atlantic City than the industrial union defenders realized that if there is to be any force at all behind this idea it is necessary to organize. They formed the "Committee for Industrial Organization." Does the resignation of John L. Lewis indicate that this group intends to take up in earnest the fight for organization of the unorganized and for industrial union organization?

Framed Way Into Presidency

In the leadership that John L. Lewis can give to this group is expressed both its strength and its weaknesses. He is both resourceful and cunning. His fixed objectives he pursues relentlessly. One need only remember how he came into the leadership of the U.M.W.A. by the back-door route. Functioning as a technical worker for the weak Frank J. Hayes, he was appointed vice-president to fill the vacancy left open when Hayes took White's place as president. Lewis was quick to utilize the opportunity to frame up Hayes, keeping him drunk most of the time and involving him in compromising situations which finally forced his resignation and thus automatically elevated Lewis to the presidency.

John L. Lewis has proved himself equally relentless in pursuing his opponents and tracking down those who fell victims to his despotic rule, always striking at the time when the opponents one way or another were in a weakened position. To this he adds the flair for the dramatic staging of his battles against his opponents in order the more surely and the more effectively to gain his ends. Often these methods have helped him enormously to consolidate his own position and strengthen his prestige among leading trade union officials. Hardly one instance in his long career can be found, however, where these special abilities were put to use in conflicts with the coal operators, except in an adverse sense insofar as the interests of the rank and file workers are concerned. One such example dates back to 1920, when he sold out the great national strike and yielded weakly in the face of the Daugherty injunction, declaring: "We cannot fight the government."

Turns Heat on Farrington

Toward the operators Lewis proved soft and exceedingly flexible; toward the opponents in the organization, uncompromising. For years he fought bitterly the equally ambitious president of the Illinois district, Frank Farrington, keeping constantly at least five dozen organizers in the district, not to organize what was then already a completely organized district, but to watch Farrington and get the goods on him. In this they succeeded and Lewis made good use of the evidence, and as usual in the most dramatic fashion. When Farrington was about to address the British Trade Union Congress as an official A. F. of L. delegate, Lewis denounced him as an agent on the payroll of the largest Illinois coal company, the Peabody Coal Co., at a salary of \$25,000 a year.

Most recently John L. Lewis again made use of his great dramatic talents in appearing suddenly on the Atlantic City A. F. of L. convention floor, asking that the rules be set aside to give consideration to a special resolution directed against Matthew Woll. He demanded the latter's resignation from the reactionary Civic Federation and won his point while the august assembly was thrown into

A Few Pages from the Records of John L. Lewis, David Dubinsky, Sidney Hillman, Chas. P. Howard et. al.

an uproar.

Wrecking the U.M.W.A.

John L. Lewis is at the helm of the strongest and undoubtedly the most militant organization in the country. But his record, to put it mildly, is an odious one, and even though he now takes his stand on the progressive side of the argument in what has become the most important dispute in the A. F. of L.—which deserves due recognition—this record should not be overlooked. In the course of further events it is quite likely that he will be compelled to become one of the outstanding champions of trade union democracy. If so, and this is to be expected, it will arise out of the logic of his present position and not because of any principled adherence to the idea of trade union democracy. His whole past record is that of ruthless wielding of bureaucratic powers, expelling progressive and left wing opponents, beginning with Alex Howatt, packing conventions and stealing votes in union elections, not shrinking from the most vicious and arbitrary measures.

On times, almost without number, the rank and file members have been in revolt against his sell-outs to the operators. Notable is the instance of 1922, when 50,000 unorganized miners of western Pennsylvania, the home of the steel trust, saved the national strike by making common cause, only to find themselves left out in the cold in the settlement, abandoned, beaten and to be starved into submission. Similarly in 1928, the striking miners of Pennsylvania and Ohio were finally left by the national union officialdom to shift for themselves, beaten, disorganized, and the national organization in the soft coal territories reduced to about 70,000 members.

The Revival

Many severe blows were thus dealt to the glorious U.M.W.A. which reached almost the depths of despair when John L. Lewis, who is now the champion of industrial unionism, inaugurated the disastrous policy of separate state and individual agreements with the operators. However, with the turn of the business cycle and the recent revival of trade union organization, the U.M.W.A. came back strongly to occupy its rightful place. The changing economic conditions and the change in the moods of the masses produced its inevitable pressure also upon the union officials. The coal miners gained new experiences battling the steel trust for organization of the captive mines. It is only natural that this should find its reflection even in the upper strata of the union officialdom.

Trade union organization, now so bitterly fought by the gigantic corporations, has really become a matter of a life and death battle. No trade union leader, no matter how reactionary and bureaucratic, can remain blind to the fact that in the issues of the class struggle—which are here, whether or no the bureaucrats attempt to deny them—only organizations of mass numbers can assure the power necessary in facing these battles. The small beginnings made toward union organization in the basic and mass production industries such as steel, automobiles and rubber, only lends further emphasis to this situation of reality. And the first real distinction that appears between the old bureaucracy left over from the days of Sam Gompers and the bloc of "progressives," headed by John L. Lewis, is the fact that the latter has much more readily responded to the pressure of new objective conditions and much more accurately gauged the actual moods of the masses.

Failure of Leadership

The Executive Council reported to the Atlantic City convention a gain for the year of another half million workers over that of the previous twelve months, bringing the total membership up to 3,045,847. This is the highest membership reported since 1922, though it is still more than a million below the 4,078,740 of 1920. Paltry figures indeed when compared to the rich opportunities for organization that were available. A mighty stream of workers was set into motion for union organization, coinciding with the revival of industrial production and stimulated by the NRA. Almost without exception this stream gravitated toward the A. F. of L. Again and again, however, these workers were repelled by the dismal failure of the A. F. of L. bureaucracy and its reactionary collusion with the employers. Therefore the matter first to be recognized is the fact that the craft union structure is no weapon for the struggle against the large corporations that union organization entails. These bureaucrats lacked both vision and will to even attempt to adjust the organizational

structure to the new needs. They leaned almost exclusively upon the government for their support, entering into a partnership in which their position as agents of capitalism meant that they were to prevent the workers from engaging in independent class activity. Consequently they did their best, with the support of the government, to strangle every strike. This could not at all inspire confidence among the workers in union organization.

Lewis Gives the Record

It was thus easy for John L. Lewis to put his finger on the weak spots at the A. F. of L. convention: "For twenty-five years or more," he said, "the American Federation of Labor has been following this precise policy (he meant the policy of doing nothing—A.S.) and surely in the absence of any other understanding of the question, a record of twenty-five years of constant, unbroken failure should be convincing to those who actually have a desire to increase the prestige of our great labor movement by expanding its membership to permit it to occupy its natural place in the sun."

"What is the record?" he went on. "Delegate Howard expressed it when he said that we laid claim to a membership of approximately three and a half million, out of an organized number of approximately thirty-nine million. There is the answer."

The Executive Council had claimed a total of 1,804 Federal labor unions organized during the

year. Lewis proceeded to show, from the report itself that this number included a period of two years, and then, reading from other pages of the report about the locals that had been suspended or disbanded and thus permanently gone out of existence drew a negative balance of 314 federal labor unions. From this Lewis concluded: "So the 1,804 organizers of the American Federation of Labor in all classifications during that year lacked 314 unions of holding their own."

"On that basis I submit it to be a reasonable statement," continued Lewis, "that it will be a long time before the American Federation of Labor organizes those 25,000,000 workers that we are all so anxious to organize. There are others among us who believe that the record indicates a need for a change in policy. This convention floor is teeming with delegates from those industries where those local unions have been established and where they are now dying like the grass withering before the autumn sun, who are ready to tell this convention of the need for that change of policy."

Green's Church Philosophy

William Green attempted to make a reply to this charge of dismal failure, saying: "One might as well ask why the church has not saved all the sinners." In this answer Green revealed his true self. As a good churchman, still a deacon in his home town, Conchockton, Ohio, he would never infer that

the church is no good. His conclusion is that the wicked sinners do not repent and do not want salvation: We said we would organize 25,000,000 workers in the great American Federation of Labor, but darn it, these workers did not want to get organized. The truth is that the workers did desire organization but the gentlemen of Green's church repelled them by woeful incompetence and deceit.

Since the Atlantic City convention the cleavage in the Executive Council has deepened. The resignation of Lewis should not be looked upon as a split but rather as a determination on his part to wash his hands of responsibility for failure and, undoubtedly also, as a means of getting his hands free in case he should decide on a serious campaign for a new and a more aggressive policy of organization. William Green has made further feeble attempts to take up the challenge, but despite his exalted position he is a poor match for the much more resourceful Lewis. This will become much more apparent when it is clearly understood that there are much more fundamental issues involved than a mere tilt between the two.

On how Green came into his high position there also hangs a tale. Old Sam Gompers had ruled the affairs of the Federation for so many years and in such an undisputed fashion that his sudden death and the problem of finding a "worthy" successor presented great difficulties. There was Matthew Woll, commonly looked upon as the Crown Prince, but his not very

large stature sheltered an even smaller mind, and he nursed great personal ambitions. The writer recalls having a debate some years ago with Matthew Woll when he appeared before the Chicago Federation of Labor to which I was a delegate at the time. The debate commenced around Woll's ardent presentation of his own special labor insurance scheme and expanded into the main issues of the A. F. of L. policy of organization. I received the distinct feeling that he was much more concerned about himself appearing in an impressive light than with the issues in question. The old Gompers crowd at the time of the departure of their helmsman feared the too great ambitions of Matthew Woll, and so William Green fell into his present position.

The real battle for the life of craft unionism versus industrial unionism can hardly be avoided. This is keenly sensed in all leading A. F. of L. circles and those who are the real theoreticians of the stark reactionary policies, like John F. Frey, are coming more to the fore, defending the shaky structure of craft unionism. There need be no doubt, however, that the future lies on the progressive side of this fight. And, aside from such considerations as the personal abilities of those who now stand out in the forefront on either side, the "progressives" have the real issues. On that side the real now beginning. In such a perspective lies also the confident hope forces are sure to come from the new unions that are bound to grow in the mass production industries, encouraged by the struggle that is that precisely from these unions, new and genuinely progressive forces will emerge.

Next to John L. Lewis and his powerful organization in back of him, as it surely will be, and should be, on the progressive issues now in dispute, the representatives of the textile workers' union stand out in the bloc that was recently formed. In this sense we have in mind first of all the organizations that are involved. Together with these two there are the needle trades unions. On the whole these represent a line-up of unions with a militant fighting tradition. Moreover, the leaderships in these unions cannot help but feel in a very marked degree the pressure from below, from a membership trained in the fire of the class struggle, and striving to make their unions effective instruments of this struggle. This should prove an important and a wholesome factor in the future orientation of this "progressive" movement of today. However, the personal integrity of their representatives, who are now in the spotlight in the "progressive" bloc, is perhaps equally important.

In this respect very little of a favorable nature can be said for McMahon, the President of the United Textile Workers. During past years his feeble abilities served to keep the textile workers divided into a multitude of ineffective quarrelling unions, and he was most often ready to sabotage any single one of them which did carry on a militant struggle. The "progressive" bloc is hardly advanced by his presence. The Vice-President of the U.T.W., Francis J. Gorman, plays a somewhat different role. No doubt his dynamic qualities have had a great deal to do with the growth of this union during the last few years. It is understood that all the more militant delegates to the U.T.W. convention, held prior to the national textile workers' strike of last year, specifically demanded that Gorman be placed in charge of the strike. He has since made many attempts to cover up and make his own weakness appear in the most favorable light, accepting a strike settlement that gave the rank and file workers nothing in return for their valiant fight. Still, at the A. F. of L. convention Gorman went further than any other prominent delegate in taking issue with the whole concept of the organizational as well as political orientation of the entrenched bureaucracy. In defending his labor party resolution he made it clear that in his opinion the labor party was to be a distinct opponent, antagonistic to the vested interests represented by the two old capitalist parties.

The Stalinists, seeing in these utterances of Gorman the living incarnation of their own "principle of the People's Front for the United States," were positively eloquent in reporting this speech at length in their "theoretical" organ. Said the Stalinist scribe: "That a labor leader of the type of Gorman comes to the identical conclusions as those formulated by the General Secretary of our party, Comrade Browder, shows both the knowledge of the conditions and needs of the masses that Comrade Browder has mastered, and that Gorman has made great advances on the basis of his recent experiences."

So, Gorman elevated himself to the position at least of becoming the unconscious medium for Browder. This ought to mean a lot to him. A true description, however, of the intervention of the Stalinists in present trade union developments would of necessity be much more prosaic in tone as it would show an absolutely pernicious influence.

The Needle Trades

The full effect of this influence has been felt in the needle trades unions, whose two most outstanding representatives, Hillman and Dubinsky, are prominent members of the "progressive" bloc. Some years ago the left wing showed its greatest resourcefulness in these unions. But this was a good deal before the Stalinist "third period." Traditionally these unions are looked upon as Socialist unions, yet almost consistently having had their definite right and left tendencies and movements. The leading officials usually laid claim to the title "Constructive Radicalism."

From the days of Schlesinger and Siegan the leaders of the I.L.G.W. were amongst the main props of the S. P. Old Guard and receiving their main support from the decrepit Jewish Daily Forward. Usually this I.L.G.W. bureaucracy was bitterly opposed by their own rank and file Socialist union members. So disreputable had this administration become that Dubinsky, a lesser evil, fell heir to it. Sidney Hillman, the President of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, on the other hand, politically unattached, understood how to gather around himself radicals and extremists of various descriptions, mostly ex's, and make them subservient to his administration.

Sydney Hillman

Whereas, in the I.L.G.W., the "Socialist" officials nearly always fought the left wing head-on, Hillman endeavored to make the left wing feel at home in the union in order to quietly muzzle it or to painlessly kick out the more determined ones. Somehow he always managed to have a "right" wing target, as for example the former New York Beckerman gang, and thereby kept the left wing busy supporting the administration measures against the gang. Hillman could always manage skillfully to make it appear that he met the left wing half way, but always in such a manner that the decision would remain on paper and cost him nothing. So, for example, he did not oppose amalgamation of the needle trades unions, so long that he felt sure others would oppose it sufficiently as a practical reality. He could display what looked very much like a real and practicable form of sympathy for the Soviet Union and even accept the shop delegate system—in principle—and in such a way that it would not interfere in the least with the domination of his official machine. Hillman began his career as a progressive leader fighting the incredibly reactionary United Garment Workers bureaucracy, and fighting against the sweatshop. With the A.C.W. growth of membership and power, he adjusted himself handsomely to all the celebrated forms of bosses' "impartial" machinery, based on the "Rule of Reason" and wound up in the cunning speed-up system called standard of production, which is the curse of the union membership. Hillman is now completing the cycle, back again in a "progressive" (Continued on Page 5)

Vote Strike on Ill. WPA

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only by a state-wide walkout. W. J. Eldridge, of Kincaid, a coal miner, acted as secretary of the conference.

The conference planned to conduct an intensive drive for the organization of all relief projects and to crystallize a wide sentiment for strike action. Conferences are to be held in various sections of the state in order to consolidate the forces of labor. The first conference to be held will be at Marion, Ill., Dec. 1, where thirteen southern Illinois counties are to be represented.

One of the features of the conference was the presence of delegates from local union number 1, the most powerful unit of the Progressive Miners of America. The Progressive Trades and Labor Union and the A. F. of L. Hod Carriers union had delegates at the conference.

Jas. Crass, Tony Scremin, James Shipley, Al Renner and Edward C. Morgan delivered inspiring addresses. Gerry Allard stated when interviewed that a strike would materialize in Illinois by Dec. 16 unless radical concessions were made by the WPA administrators before that time.

"Sure the workers will strike," Allard declared when asked if the workers would respond to the call for action. "As a matter of fact, hundreds of them are already on strike. The sentiment is there. Our job is to organize it and lead it in the most effective channels."

Toledo-Union Town

Militant Battles That Defeated the Bosses

By ART PREIS

Over one and a half years have passed since that memorable night in May, 1934 when some ten thousand embattled Toledo workers besieged the stronghold of the Toledo Auto-Lite plant and fought through those six days of magnificent struggle against all the armed hosts of the capitalist state. The echo of that victorious "Battle of Chestnut Hill" beat against the eager ears of the American workers and inspired the first great strike wave under the "New Deal."

Hard in the wake of the Auto-Lite strike came the two famous and historic battles of the Minneapolis truck-drivers under the leadership of Local 574, the general textile strike, the San Francisco general strike, and a flood of other militant labor struggles.

Toledo a Union Town

Emboldened by the lessons of the Auto-Lite encounter, Toledo labor began a steady organizational upsurge. Although every step of the path toward a solid and fighting union front has been marked by the fiercest opposition, both from the employers and overnment on the outside and reactionary union bureaucrats from within, the one-time notorious "scab-town" Toledo is today a genuinely union town. This development did not spring to full flower overnight out of the earth. Following the Auto-Lite strike, Toledo experienced one strike battle after another, the Armour and Swift, Larrowe Milling, General Milk Drivers, FERA strikes and a flock of others. The primary issue of most of these scraps was the establishment of the union, union recognition and the fulfillment of the grandiose promises of the late-lamented NRA.

Chevrolet Strike

It was therefore no mere coincidence that in May of 1935, but one year after the Auto-Lite strike, Toledo labor again set off the spark which revitalized the apathetic workers in the giant auto industry

"THE BATTLE OF CHESTNUT HILL"



and launched the second strike wave under the Roosevelt regime. The Chevrolet strike, under the leadership of hard-hitting, intelligent union progressives, served not only to entrench unionism in several General Motors plants, but exposed to the workers of the nation the treacherous role of Green, Dillon and other enemies of industrial unionism, stimulated the fight for union progressivism and the organization of the workers in basic industries.

The three weeks battle of the Chevrolet workers, climaxed by the unforgettable demonstration of the strikers against Francis Dillon, right-hand Green man, on the night when they were finally hooded into partial but short-lived defeat, served to crystallize anti-Dillon-Green sentiment in the auto, rubber and other unions, led to the formation of autonomous international unions in these industries, and spurred the fight for industrial unionism in the recent A. F. of L. convention and subsequently.

The Unemployed Leagues

No history of the class struggle in Toledo for the past two years,

MASS ACTION IN TOLEDO

