

# Analysis of the Akron Strike And the Role of the C I O

By A. J. MUSTE

## Industrial Unionism in Mass Production Industry

The analysis of the recent strike in the Goodyear Tire and Rubber plants in Akron centers about three points: the role and temper of the strikers themselves; the role of union officials and in particular John L. Lewis's Committee for Industrial Organization; and that of the working-class political parties and groups.

In tackling the Goodyear Company, the strikers were pitting their forces against the biggest of the tire and rubber companies, which had one of the oldest, and until the recent strike most "successful" company unions, and which had very important connections with big corporations in steel and other industries. Thus Tom Girdler of Republic Steel is on the Goodyear board of directors and offered his strike-breaking troops to Goodyear. On the other hand, the intensely competitive situation existing in the industry was favorable to the strikers in that Goodyear could not afford to lose business to other companies. From another standpoint it was this very competitive situation leading the companies to devise means to cut labor costs which brought the combination of wage-cuts, speed-up, increased hours and lay-offs by the Goodyear Company against which the workers revolted.

### Vigilantes Crushed

The militancy and solidarity of the Goodyear strikers marked the high point in the class struggle for 1936 and in some respects for the entire recent period in American labor history. Before the Goodyear men were assured of support even from their own local and international union, they closed down the Goodyear plant and militantly and successfully defied an injunction. Immediately thereafter the workers in the Firestone and Goodrich plants and in most of the other industries in Akron as well as the Project Workers Unions were mobilized. They were set to pour out of the plants en masse and institute a general strike at any attempt by any agency to break the Goodyear picket line by force. When in one of the last weeks of the strike, the company inspired the organization of a vigilante organization on a large scale and publicly appealed for violence against the strikers and their leaders, six thousand strikers gathered on the picket line openly armed with clubs and other weapons and challenged the vigilantes to do their worst. After all their loud talk, the so-called "forces of law and order" decided that their aim was simply to rally public opinion for an early settlement of the strike. The strikers maintained their ranks and their spirit to the very end. Whatever was gained, in the strike, and that was considerable, was gained because of this.

### Role of C.I.O.

The role of Lewis's Committee for Industrial Organization in the Akron strike, as in other situations in this period, was not a simple one and no simple and completely final estimate of it is possible. There is, on the one hand, no question that the C.I.O. made contributions to the strike. The moral influence of its support counted for a good deal. The trained organizers sent into Akron by the Committee had an important share in building up the excellent strike organization. The fact of C.I.O. endorsement doubtless helped in getting financial support from union bodies throughout the country, though that given by the C.I.O. and the unions affiliated with it was utterly insignificant.

There is, however, much to be said on the other side. The C.I.O. came out in support of the strike only after the workers had shut down the plant. It made no effort, although repeatedly urged to do so by militant strikers, to extend the strike to Goodyear plants in other cities, an elementary step. By speech and action C.I.O. representatives sought to tone down rather than capitalize to the utmost upon the militancy of the Akron workers. They agreed to permit tires to be moved out of the plant though the strikers were against it and there is every reason to believe that railroad men would not have moved any freight cars if a picket line had been maintained across the tracks.

### An Agency for Roosevelt

That the C.I.O. is an agency for rallying Roosevelt support from among the unions and the workers generally has been openly demonstrated since the close of the Akron strike with the organization by Lewis, Hillman, Berry etc., of the Non-Partisan Labor Committee. The Akron strike furnished an illustration of the equivocal role to which this leads in strike situations. It is generally understood that the "influence" of Lewis and other trade unionists with Roosevelt had an important bearing on keeping the militia out of Akron—in an elec-

tion year in a key state. But this means, for one thing, that in "gratitude" votes are to be corralled for Roosevelt and for another thing that the strikers must be restrained so that the politicians may plausibly contend that there is really no need for calling out the militia. Obviously, too, it is fantastic to suppose that labor leaders who base themselves upon Roosevelt can possibly push employers in the basic industries to a settlement that costs them anything. And this point is of crucial importance in considering the strike settlements which the C.I.O. will support or be "forced" to make in situations like Akron.

### The McGrady Arbitration

Now the C.I.O. was prepared to accept the McGrady arbitration proposed at the beginning of the strike. The effect of accepting it would unquestionably have been a betrayal of the strike. The role of the C.I.O. representatives in the March 14 "settlement" which was rejected is not wholly clear. That is not the case with regard to the March 21 terms, the acceptance of which brought the strike to an end.

Admittedly these terms were an improvement on those of the previous week. Admittedly also they did not offer the strikers even that minimum (of assurance, for example, that Goodyear would no longer finance the company union, nor recognize its representatives) which they had laid down in a compromise proposal, from which already certain important demands had been eliminated, the previous week. It is also a matter of public record that the C.I.O. representatives suddenly launched the most vigorous, even feverish, public activity in order to get the strikers to vote for the acceptance of these terms and so wind up the strike. If the C.I.O. opposed acceptance of the March 14 terms, it has to explain what induced it to make such frantic efforts to put over only slightly improved terms a week later. There is not the slightest indication of any important change during that interval either in the general objective situation or in the temper of the strikers. In the effort to put over the March 21 terms the C.I.O. representatives who had themselves been the object of C. Nelson Sparks's "red scare" campaign during the week put on a "red scare" against the Workers Party, Communist Party, "radicals" generally and the present writer by name, stooping lower than A.F. of L. reactionaries have ever gone in similar situations in which I have been involved by saying to reporters that I must be acting for a strike-break-

ing agency which just wanted the strike prolonged so as to make money by cracking workers' heads. It was in such an atmosphere of hysteria that the strikers voted to accept the March 21 terms and ended the strike, after the more militant elements among them had criticized the terms and indicated their preference for continuing the fight, but stated their readiness to accept loyally whatever decision might be taken by the majority.

Now in the first place any child can see that the terrific effort that was required, the barrage that had to be laid down in public and private, to put the settlement over disposed completely of the argument that either the general run of strikers or the more conscious, militant elements were tired or discouraged or for whatever reason wanted to get back to work on pretty much any terms.

### How the Agreement Carried

Secondly, it disposes of the argument that the terms themselves were so clear and so desirable from the strikers' point of view that any criticism or opposition could spring only from dense ignorance or actual treason to the union, the Rubber Workers officials and the C.I.O. were able to put them over only by taking a vote in an atmosphere of hysteria and without giving the strikers a minute for real study of the terms. Two large sheets of mimeographed material of a very complicated nature were handed them as they came to the meeting where the vote had to be taken, and this in spite of the fact that the strikers had been told two days before that they would be given several days to study the proposals.

One argument that has been presented by defenders of the C.I.O. role is that funds were low, money for feeding strikers was running out and the strikers were afraid to go on under these circumstances. One unwillingly admits the audacity of the cynicism that is implied here. It is generally agreed that the C.I.O. with some of the mightiest unions in the country attached to it gave a paltry few thousand dollars to the strike fund. Let us restrain any indignation which the situation might occasion, and simply observe that no group which thinks that the employers in the basic industries in this country can be licked on the basis of putting a few thousand dollars into a strike against Goodyear Tire and Rubber involving fifteen thousand workers can expect to be taken seriously.

### Timidity of Local Leaders

Still another argument used by the defenders of the C.I.O. role is that the local and national officials of the Rubber Workers Union were weak and timid, did not want a vigorous and large-scale struggle, would not ask for money which had virtually been put at their disposal. If they had only followed the

wishes and the lead of the C.I.O. much more might have been won. It taxes our credulity to pretty near the breaking point to believe this. An organization with prestige and money offers a victory and a union to a group of new and ambitious union leaders on a silver platter, and the latter decline the gift!

But let us assume there is some basis for the argument, then what follows? That these weak-kneed leaders and their course must be backed up by the kind of red-baiting campaign Germer of the C.I.O. along with Burns of the Rubber Workers launched in the closing hours of the strike? That the "heat" must be turned on as was done, on the militants among the strikers to force them against their will to accept this situation? Obviously, if the job of organizing the basic industries is to be taken seriously, then in such a crisis a (supposedly) genuine and competent leadership must find means of rallying the masses against a false and incompetent leadership. We may surmise that John L. Lewis who still maintains arbitrary provisional presidencies under his own direct control in most of the soft coal districts of the U.M.W. is not likely to see eye to eye with the rank and file or insurgents as against officials in such situations. But that is another reason for concluding that he cannot be relied upon to see the job of organization in the basic industries through.

There is but one logical conclusion. Whether in so many words or not, Lewis's real master, i.e., Roosevelt and the interests and forces which he represents made it clear: "This thing has gone far enough. Goodyear is giving all it will give without a regular fight. That we will not stand for. We will not hold back the militia any longer. Wind it up at any cost." And when it was wound up the rubber companies, Goodyear included, had the 36 to 40 hour week although only a month before a U.S. Department of Labor Committee had stated flatly that there was no excuse for the abandonment of the 30 hour week. Furthermore, the companies laid the basis for recouping any losses and fattening profits by an increase in the price of their product!

### Parties in the Strike

Finally a word about the role of political parties and groups. The local S.P. in Akron is small and attempted no distinctive role. The S.P. leaders in Akron were attached to the C.I.O. and played no independent part.

The Stalinists had some influence on some of the militant rank and files. When the "red-baiting" started in the closing hours of the strike, the Stalinist representatives took to crawling on their bellies before the union bureaucrats in the abject manner which has become so familiar by now and so easy for them. They declared uncritically for the settlement terms before seeing them and laid any opposition that was being voiced at the door of "crazy Trotskyists." This, despite the fact that one who reads between the lines of the Daily Worker articles following the strike, gets even there a confirmation of every criticism we have made in this article. In exchange the C.P. received an "apology" from Vice President Burns of the Rubber Workers Union for having included them among the critics of his course. To date they seem not yet to have gotten a similar public vote of confidence from John L. Lewis or even from Adolph Germer but perhaps these will also be obtained eventually—for a price!

The Workers Party group in Akron has for two years been in close touch with the militants among the rubber workers. Through them they played a highly creditable part in the strike in line with the policies sketched in this article. The Akron strike, like all the recent strike struggles, demonstrated the key position of a group of progressives and militants including conscious revolutionary elements. The better organization of these elements is a crying need.

To summarize: Militants must make every use that can be made of the C.I.O. They rightly support any specific correct measure for which the C.I.O. may stand, for example industrial as against craft unionism. At no time can they simply uncritically identify themselves with the C.I.O. or foster the illusion that the C.I.O. as such can be trusted to carry through the terrific struggles which we are bound to see in the basic industries.

The solidarity and militancy displayed by the Goodyear strikers and their fellow-workers in Akron achieved substantial results. They tied up the great Goodyear plants. They smashed an injunction. They made a farce out of the vigilante movement. They forced Goodyear to negotiate with a union committee. They won some concessions in the settlement. They laid the foundation of a union, having proved to themselves that they could stick together and fight. They are carrying their struggle forward now in the plants—well aware that the fight has not ended but has just begun in real earnest.

# Unification of the Unemployed and the Task Ahead

(Continued from Page 1)

French imperialism. Are the Stalinists against imperialist war? Absolutely! They will vote against it any day in the week and twice on Lenin's birthday. But, if the imperialist government fights a war against another imperialist government in alliance with the Soviet Union, then, do you see, it is no longer an imperialist war. Or, if the "capitalist" government is allied with the Soviets in a war against another "capitalist" government, the former somehow ceases to be "quite" a capitalist government and its war is not "quite" a capitalist war.

Is this merely a question of petty factional bickering between Stalinists and Marxists? If it is, then at the same time it involves nothing less than the life of the labor movement, and literally, the lives of millions of workers in the world war to come. It is such a "trifle" that the hawk-eyed Stalinists promptly pounced upon it, with the result that the phrase underlined above was deleted from the final draft of the resolution. The Stalinists were vigilant, aggressive, organized. The Militants were not, with the result that they ceded ground where they had no need to, where they should, instead, have advanced.

The contrast of firmness and looseness, manifested in these two situations, was not absent in other convention fields. The Councils acted as a unit, as did the C.P. stooge organizations in the so-called "independent caucus" which was rigged and framed with all the expertise that comes from years of Stalinist training. The W.A.A. acted like anything but a unit in the convention, and the S. P. Militants acted like anything but a unit in the W.A.A. Result: the work of the Stalinists was facilitated, both politically and organizationally. Even flagrant (and characteristic) acts of disloyalty of the Stalinists—such as was involved in the violation of agreement made on representation from the "independent caucus"—could not be counteracted by the unorganized Socialists.

This is not only an indication of the road that must still be travelled by the Left wing in the Socialist Party—a road which the presence at the convention of splendid rank and file workers gives high promise that they will take. But it is also a matter which justifies apprehensions about the course which the Stalinists will take in the immediate period to follow, during which arrangements are to be completed for the holding of various unification conventions on state-wide scales. A repetition of what happened in Washington, on an even more injurious scale, is inevitable, unless its lessons are learned and steps are taken accordingly.

There were really three views represented in the convention on the "Farmer-Labor" party: the familiar Stalinist view; the S. P. Militants' view in favor of a "genuine" Farmer-Labor party but not in 1936; and the revolutionary Marxian view held by many of the delegates of the former National Unemployed League. Aroused out of their hypocritical meekness when the question arose toward the very end of the convention, the Stalinists stormed and shouted from floor and platform in favor of their standpoint. A few Socialists also took the floor for contradictory speeches in line with their own views. But the representatives of the third tendency sought in vain for even the five minutes allotted to discussion speakers.

Important for our theme, however, is the fact that, leaving apart the principle differences we have with the Militants on the question of the F.L.P., they are entirely correct in their resistance to any commitments that would tie them to the kite of a Stalinist Farmer-Labor Party hoax in the 1936 elections. Nevertheless, even though they were presumably a minority in the convention, the Stalinists virtually shouted through a "substitute motion" by their spokesman, Weisman, worded in such a manner as to leave the door wide open for the C.P. agents in the W.A.A. to maneuver the organization into precisely the position the Socialists do not want to take. How? Mainly because the Stalinists acted on the rule of every man as one, while the Socialists acted mainly on the rule of every man for himself.

Similarly on the question of war. With trifling exceptions in formulation, the resolution originally drafted by some of the Militants in the W.A.A. was flawless from a working class standpoint. It pledged the organization not to support the capitalist government of the U.S. in any war it may undertake, regardless of who its allies may be. Now, this last clause is far from a trifle, for if you wish, it is around this "trifle" that the Stalinists are already recruiting troops for

## A Report of the Recent Convention at Washington

the relationship of forces and their renowned skill at manipulation would permit.

**'Militants' Disorganized**  
To the extent that the organization of the unemployed must deal with such problems—and it is impossible and incorrect to avoid them entirely—it was the job of the progressive elements in the convention to counter the tactics of the Stalinists. More easily said than done, however!

The Stalinists came to the convention in the usual manner. They were prepared in advance to act on every question, and what is more, to act as one man. In a word, they were a disciplined political force. The same cannot be said of the Socialists. Except for Lieberman of Pittsburgh and one or two others, the Old Guard of the S.P. was not even represented at the convention (work among the lowly jobless is hardly a dignified occupation for a respectable social democrat!). But while the bulk of the Socialists in the W.A.A. are supporters, in the S.P., of the Militants, and even count among the best Left wing elements, there was no noticeable unity, and certainly no efficiency in action, in their conduct during the convention.

### No Unity in Action at Meet

On those questions in which the Stalinists are vitally interested—and rightly so; everybody else should also be—such as the Farmer-Labor party, the C.P. representatives showed both aggressiveness and unity. Barring isolated cases, the representatives of the S. P. showed neither quality. It was evident to the observer that not only did the S. P. Militants at the convention display a deplorable lack of unity of opinion (which is far from a vice, providing the prevailing opinion is a correct one), but what is worse, this lack of harmonious view was translated on the convention floor, in negotiation committees and in other committees, into a lack of unity in action—that is, into an absence of discipline.

The entirely proper sentiments of many of the S.P. Militants to organize a unity of action, while it resulted in remedying conditions in some measure, did not prove sufficiently effective in attaining that necessary level of discipline particularly demanded by the presence of the organized Stalinist phalanx.

### The Farmer-Labor Party

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### The N.U.L. Delegation

A word remains to be said about the ranks of the former N.U.L. Its delegation of close to 100 men and women from the field made an impressive showing, especially by the side of the financially—infinitely more resourceful Stalinist Councils, whose convention had only a score more in attendance. A lamentable contrast to this showing was made by Arnold Johnson, former national secretary of the N.U.L. and belated convert to Stalinism after months of protestations of fealty to the Fourth International. Despite all the C.P. support and Daily Worker hulloos behind him, Johnson was only able to muster a good baker's dozen from nowhere in particular for his "convention," which promptly dissolved into the "independent caucus." The business meeting of the former N.U.L., after a report by a special investigating committee which heard both Johnson and the loyal officers (Ramaglia, McKinney, Selander), voted unanimously to endorse the action of the officers mentioned in removing Johnson from office in the emergency he had created, and in joining forces with the Workers Alliance.

The delegates present at the N.U.L. convention could count themselves among the most devoted and experienced front-line fighters in the movement of the unemployed, and for that matter, in the labor movement generally. Their entry into the ranks of the united organization, reinforced by the election onto the new National Executive Board of such well-known militants as Ted Selander of Toledo and Sam Gordon of Allentown, brings to the merged movement the best of the traditions of the National Unemployed League, the best of its fighters, its experience, its ranks—constituting, all together, one, and not the least, of the guarantees for the great future of aggressive struggle that the new Alliance has before it.