

In The Teachers Union

INDEPENDENT GROUP COMBATS PEOPLE'S FRONT POLICIES OF STALINIST ADMINISTRATION

NEW YORK.—The honeymoon period in the Teachers Union of New York City is over. Once more the battle for progressive policies in the largest and most important organization of the American Federation of Teachers in being waged with full vigor. In order that the reader may gain an understanding of why the progressive forces are fighting the present leadership we present a resume of the important issues that have arisen.

Period of Growth

In 1935, the combined efforts of the various groups that were opposed to the Lefkowitz-Linville leadership resulted in saving the Teachers Union from disruption. Due to the progressive policies that were adopted and to the inner democratic regime that was instituted by the new administration which consisted of representatives of the various groups, there followed a period of rapid growth of the Union from a membership of about 1400 after the split to a membership of over 6,000 in less than two years. Recruits were obtained from employed and unemployed public school teachers in the elementary and high school divisions, from the school clerical staffs; a college section was developed which has since grown into a separate local, and a private school section was set up to organize teachers employed in private schools.

Due to the effective use of mass pressure tactics a number of noteworthy victories were won: the restoration of salary cuts, the appointment of hundreds of new teachers and the reinstatement of dismissed college teachers.

A monthly organ, *The New York Teacher*, and a weekly news-letter were issued regularly. The educational authorities were compelled to recognize the existence of this new factor by the granting of various other concessions to the teachers including a form of semi-recognition granted to the Teachers Union in official and semi-official conferences, etc.

Role of "Rank and File" Group

In the phenomenal growth of the Union the chief beneficiary was the Rank and File Group—the largest, the most influential and best organized of the former opposition groups—developed originally on the basis of a "third period" trade union, and political program. Despite the fact that its dual union policies and adventurous tactics drove hundreds of old members out of the Union and into the camp of the Teachers Guild splitters (Lefkowitz-Linville), its essentially militant program and the ardor with which it carried it out attracted many of the younger teachers to whom trade unionism was a novel experience.

But the militancy and progressiveness of the "Rank and File" leadership did not last very long. People's frontism and class collaboration policies were imposed from without upon a young leadership that basically desired to follow a progressive policy. This

thought is expressed not to excuse the course of the leadership but to explain the vicious role of people's frontism. The Rank and File "lions" who once roared for mass action and nothing but mass action now become mild parliamentary lobbyists at Albany and at City Hall and at the Board of Education.

Mr. Isadore Begun, the leader of the Rank and File Group, who was ousted from his teaching job by the Board of Education because of his dramatic espousal of the cause of a dismissed teacher, now began preaching soft-speaking and collaboration with certain members of the Board of Education. He, who hauled Dr. Lefkowitz over the coals for his defense of Mayor LaGuardia, now became lyrical over the virtues of the people's front mayor.

Defend American Legion

It not only issued invitations to the American Legion, but defended this exponent of American militarism from hostile criticism of its anti-labor policies. To the dual union splitters, the Teachers Guild, it offered the liquidation of groups in the Union, one of the basic democratic issues in the conflict.

United Progressives Organize

In opposition to these policies, there was organized the United Progressive Group, which was a merger of various tendencies in the Union who were opposed to the unprincipled, demagogical and class collaborationist policies of the "Rank and File" leadership. But the United Progressives were unable to make any headway against the influence of the "Rank and File" because within the former was a distinctly right wing tendency, (Davidson-Beigle leadership) which believed in collaboration with the Rank and File leadership in the hope of reforming it.

This right wing criticized the Rank and File, not with the objective of convincing it of the superiority of its policies. When the Union elections of June 1936 took place, it executed a right about face agreement with the Rank and File Group for a common slate. This agreement was an unprincipled one, because of the basic differences that existed between the two groups, but it was brought about because the leadership of the Rank and File and of the right wing of the United Progressives found it more convenient to divide the posts between themselves without a principled struggle in full view of the membership.

That the Davidson-Beigle leadership of the United Progressives had sold the birthright of the Group for a mess of pottage was revealed soon after the election was over. The "Rank and File" leadership proceeded not only to tear up the common program agreed to as a basis of the slate, but in place of the collective leadership in the Union which was to be the concrete expression of the deal, they proceeded to make it impossible for the adherents of the United Progressives to function as committee

chairmen and in other posts that had been allotted to them. Their resignation, one by one, was clear proof of the unsoundness of such a course. The bankruptcy of the Davidson-Beigle of course was apparent.

Strong protest movements within the membership of the United Progressives against such election deals soon developed, but the struggle against the Davidson-Beigle leadership came to a head, when in violation of the clearly expressed policy of the United Progressive Group on the question of independent political action, this leadership broke away from the Group to form a bloc with the "Rank and File" in support of the American Labor party's Roosevelt-Lehman Campaign of 1936.

Emergence of the Independent Group

The chief issue in the union elections of May, 1937 was the problem of dealing with unemployment among teachers which has been acute since 1929. New York City teachers obtain regular positions in the service after passing civil service examinations conducted by a Board of Examiners. After that they must wait for appointment by the Board of Education, which appoints only when vacancies exist or when vacancies are created by it due to funds made available for that purpose by the city government in the annual budget. During the past economic crisis, the Board made relatively few appointments with the result that the classes became overcrowded on the one hand and on the other hand thousands of unemployed teachers walked the streets.

In the elementary school division there are thousands of teachers now on regular lists, who have been waiting for appointment since 1930, not to speak of many thousands of qualified teachers in this branch of the service who have been failed arbitrarily by the Board of Examiners and who have been driven out of the profession altogether.

In the high school division there are a few thousand unemployed teachers who have been failed by the Board for regular positions but who are employed as substitutes on temporary jobs as these arise, at a fraction of the salary of the regular teacher. This is clearly a wage cutting device. During the session of the State Legislature the Administration of the Union proposed a bill requiring the Board of Examiners to place substitutes with three years experience on regular list even though they had not passed written civil service examinations.

Measure Deceives

On the surface, this appeared very attractive to many substitutes who thought that now their troubles would be over. But a closer examination of this measure will show that it virtually abolishes the civil service system of New York State, a system which furnishes a certain measure of protection for some 200,000 civil service employees from exploitation by corrupt politi-

cians,—a system which is essentially progressive because it is based on merit rather than on political pull or favoritism. Beside, the measure, if passed, would benefit only a few teachers at the top of the list who had secured their temporary positions chiefly through favoritism. The bill did not provide a single dollar for jobs by which appointments could be made and which is the nub of the whole matter. This measure appeals as we have said before, to the substitute because of its apparent concession in the matter of exemption from examinations, but the opposition by exposing the people's front demagoguery as a fraud, and by proposing a program of fair examinations and appropriations of millions of dollars with which to make more appointments was able to poll 44 per cent of the vote cast in a referendum vote of the membership.

The opposition to the Administration measure was so great that they did not dare to introduce it in the legislature. Besides, a modified bill, passed by the State Legislature, was vetoed by Gov. Lehman, the people's front Governor, at the request of Mayor LaGuardia, the people's front mayor. Together with this legislation, he also vetoed other legislation raising the per diem wages of the underpaid substitutes and the annual salary of certain categories of underpaid school teachers.

It was from this debacle that the Independent Group arose and conducted an election campaign based upon a program calling for the end of over-crowded classes by the reduction of classroom registers and the appropriation of

millions of dollars with which to make appointments of substitute teachers to regular positions.

In addition, the program called for independent political action and against the policy of the American Labor Party in endorsing the candidates of capitalist parties. It also called for opposition to imperialist wars and against affiliation with the American League Against War and Fascism with its collective security program.

Independents Show Strength

In opposition to the Administration, and in opposition to the Progressive Group, which agreed with the Administration in its support of the policies and candidates of the American Labor Party, the Independent slate was able to poll over 20 per cent of the vote and to elect several of its candidates to the Executive Board, a remarkable showing considering the grip which the Administration has had on the membership in the past.

In the national convention of the American Federation of Teachers at Madison, Wis., which followed, the delegates of the Independent Group, combined with other delegations to form a national caucus in advocacy of a progressive program calling for a national campaign for the purpose of organizing the more than one million teachers of the country and in opposition to the people's front on the war question. (See *Socialist Appeal* Sept. 11, 1937 for an account of this convention.)

Another article dealing with the Teachers Union will appear in the next issue.

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