

What is a Strike?

By Facts

The writer of this article touches on a point upon which the American workers have long been divided—the utility of the present craft form of unions as opposed to the One Big Union. The attitude he takes, that the present craft unions are necessary and can be made to suit the needs of the workers, is one side of this important question. We invite discussion by our readers on the matter.—Editor.

EVERY worker knows that there is no such thing as a strike by one man. If one man goes "on strike" he simply loses his job. Nor is there such a thing as a strike by two or three men. And in a large plant a strike by fifty, or a hundred, or five hundred men is just as futile as a strike by two or three. It does not cripple the plant. It only cripples the strikers.

If the workers know this, then common horse sense ought to tell them that a strike by one craft union is not a strike, either. It may look like a strike, but it isn't. A strike occurs when *all* the workers quit together for a common purpose. Anything less than this is not a strike, but only part of a strike. It is usually worse than no strike at all. In principle it is the same thing as a strike by one man.

So long as the workers are content with half-strikes and quarter-strikes and one-tenth strikes they will have to be content with half-meals, and quarter-clothing, and one-tenth bedrooms.

Whenever one craft union in a shop goes on strike and leaves the others at work, there is no real strike in the shop. There is only part of a strike. For a few days it may look like the real thing. The striking men may be highly skilled. They may not be replaceable by ordinary strike-breakers. They may, by their strike, slow up work all through the shop, or even stop it altogether. This may look bad for the boss. But nine times out of ten it only *looks* bad.

There are at least ten different ways of breaking such a strike as this, and every one of them hurts the workers worse than it hurts the boss. These are some of the ways:

(1) If orders are slack, the boss may shut down the plant entirely. Then all the workers who stayed at their jobs starve, and *get nothing for it*. The owners have saved more money up than the workers and can stand it longer. Often the owners actually make money by strikes such as these and hire *agents provocateur* to provoke them. When the strike fails the unions always come back weaker than before.

(2) The boss may transfer his orders to other plants doing the same kind of work. This enables him to keep his contracts, at little more than ordinary cost, and helps him to starve out the strikers, which is an advantage to him in itself. Employers are always ready to help each other in these little ways. When their interests are the same they know enough to *act together for each other's benefit*, which is more than can be said of some workers.

(3) The boss may import skilled strike-breakers. Some union leaders will tell you that skilled men can't be replaced, but it is not so. The boss can get skilled men "loaned" from another factory, enough to keep orders going and starve out the strikers. This has often happened. Any employer is glad to spare a few skilled workers to help break a strike in another plant. Employers know where their interests lie.

(4) The boss may hire smooth-tongued scabs to join the union, go on strike and then urge the men to go back to work. In some unions the man with the loud mouth can persuade the others. So all the boss needs to do is to hire a man with a loud mouth and see that he takes out a union card and goes on strike with the craft. For the first few days he damns the boss louder than anybody else; then he changes his tune and says it's hopeless, and that all must go back to work.

(5) The boss may give the increase asked for. Often this is the best way of all. If the craft is small the increase does not cost him much. He can usually make it up by speeding up the less skilled workers, by "revising" the piece-rate, or by introducing a fancy bonus-system, where the more you work the less you make. Or he may simply raise the price of the product which the workers must buy. But what he is most likely to do, when he gives the strikers what they ask for, is to tie them up to an *agreement* of a year, or two years or five years. Then, later, when the other craft unions come to strike, this union can't quit with them because it has a "contract." It promised the boss it would scab and it must keep its promise. If

the boss has all the skilled crafts tied up with signed "contracts," the unskilled workers can strike all they like. There are strikers to take their places.

(6) The boss may *buy out the strike*. This is often done, for there are always some union leaders who are more anxious about money than about the working class. The workers can never be sure that there isn't some union leader who will sell out.

These are only some of the ways in which the employer can break the strike of a small craft union, or turn it to the disadvantage of the other workers. Of course, the workers are familiar with these methods. But they forget.

The employers are clever. They have studied strike problems for years. They know all the ways of breaking little strikes or using them for their own advantage. They have made a science of it. The working man cannot possibly be familiar with all the ways of beating the boss at these crafty games. If the working class fights with pop-guns it is sure in the end to be beaten.

The strength of the working class does not lie in the accuracy with which it can aim a pop-gun. It lies in the strength of its heavy artillery and the mass attack on the economic field. The strength of the employer is his cleverness. The strength of the workers is their numbers. The working class should conduct its struggles with its own best weapons. It should fight where it is strong; not where it is weak.

It used to be said that the employer does not like unions. This is no longer true. The employer likes unions, and *the more there are the better he likes them*. He would like twenty or thirty or fifty unions in his shop. For he knows how to manage them.

John D. Rockefeller likes unions. Charlie Schwab likes unions. They have said so in public. Nearly all "progressive" employers nowadays like "good unions" conducted on "sensible, conservative lines." They like craft unions and "shop unions," and any sort of unions which divide the working class. The only thing, nowadays, which makes them wild with rage is the idea of one big union.

The worker will readily understand why this is so. When a general is fighting in the field, the first thing he tries to do is to divide the forces of the enemy. The world knows how badly the Allies fared when their armies were commanded by *three generals*, fighting against a unified command. Think what it would have been like if the Allied army had been split up into three hundred independent regiments, each with a general at its head.

The "progressive" American employer does not try to crush the unions. He tries to divide them. "Divide and conquer" is the first maxim of the general in the field and the general in industry. Whenever the employer succeeds in creating a rivalry between two unions, or in persuading them to act separately and for their own separate interests, he wins a victory.

The workers must understand this modern strategy on the part of the boss. They must realize what kind of a fight they are up against. It is not the old fight of local skirmishes. It has become a general fight, scientific and highly organized. The employers during the war have learned to act together. They hold regular conferences at which all the employers, the country over, decide on labor policies, and pledge mutual aid in carrying them out. The employers are fast coming to adopt a Unified Command and a Unified Strategy. And their Unified Strategy is this:

To welcome unions to encourage them, even to organize them, and then to make them weak, jealous and "tame."

The union leader who urges merely the old-line of

attack, simply does not know what is happening in the industrial world.

There are many leaders who will tell you that the unskilled workers may have to form one general union for their protection, but that the skilled are adequately protected through their craft organizations. They will tell you that the skilled workers are limited in number and have a monopoly value on their skill, that when they strike they cannot be replaced.

If this ever was wholly true, it is rapidly becoming untrue. The skilled craftsman no longer has a monopoly of his skill. "Efficiency methods" and the war have changed that fast.

Four years ago the machinists were among the most highly skilled workers in the country. Their work was absolutely essential to their employers. They were well organized in many places. They spent four years of apprenticeship learning their trade. They limited the number of apprentices. If they went on strike they could not be replaced. They were getting good wages. They were a part of the "aristocracy of labor."

The war came. With it came an enormous increase in the product to the making of which they alone had the necessary skill. Profits became enormous. The cost of living almost doubled. One would think that the machinists could get anything they asked for under those circumstances. That their skill would absolutely protect them.

But just the contrary happened. The demand for increased production brought thousands of unskilled workers, including women, into the trade. The unions were obliged to cancel their apprenticeship rules. Efficiency men got on the job and taught the unskilled to do parts of the machinists' work. Then they put the unskilled workers on piece rates that enabled them to earn more than the regular machinists. Soon, nearly all the machinist's trade was being carried on by unskilled workers, with a few skilled machinists to oversee them. And usually, the skilled overseer was getting less than the unskilled worker. The unions were obliged, for self-protection, to take the unskilled into the unions. New rates were set up. The classifications for which the machinists had struggled all these years, and which they regarded as their protection, were discarded. Piece rates were established which nobody but the bosses could understand. And when the war came to an end the machinist's trade *was no longer a trade*.

The men were laid off. Which men? Why, of course, the high-priced skilled workmen who were the old and loyal members of the craft union, those who had spent four years at learning their trade. They were laid off exactly because they were skilled craftsmen and members of a strong craft union. If they strike, it will do them no good. The newcomers, bossed by a few skilled machinists and efficiency men, can carry on the work at much less than union rates.

What has happened to the machinist's trade is happening to most of the trades, to some gradually, to others rapidly. The worker's skill is no longer a protection to him. The bosses have learned how to break the unskilled into the skilled man's job. That is part of their new strategy.

The only defense the workers have against this strategy is the solidarity of the masses. If a few workers strike the bosses will know how to manage the situation. If all strike, the bosses are helpless.

The workers of the General Electric Company have learned their lesson. Many of them are highly skilled, but that will not help them always. They have learned that to strike successfully you must strike the whole plant. So when the machinists tried to organize the Lynn plant last summer, they did not simply work with the machinists. They marched through the plant with an American flag and *called upon everybody to quit*. As a result there are unions in the Lynn plant today for the first time in its history.

But then the General Electric workers went on strike and learned another lesson. They found that it was not enough to strike the whole plant. For the General

Continued on page 7