Labor in the War — and After

By "Half-Past Ten"

WE READ of strikes and "labor disturbances," but we hear nothing of those "faithful, loyal" workers who trusted their public servants and "patriotic" employers during the war. Here is a case which I think is classic.. It lacks no detail of bureaucratic, empty promises, of patriotic-profiteering subterfuge.

In June 1918, the organized machinists of the B. F. Sturtevant Co., Hyde Park, Mass., applied to their employers for standard pay and conditions. They met refusal. Up until this time the union had been weak, having had a strike in the plant a few years previously and been beaten; but last June it was well organinzed again, and in a position to get the full advantage of the law of supply and demand in their commodity, labor-power. However, while the demand for labor was large and the supply small, making a condition when the price (wages) would rise, there were other conditions to be considered, conditions which abrogated this economic law. (The law is infallible when the supply of labor is large, thereby lowering wages; but is subject to human manipulation when the demand is great, thereby preventing a rise in wages.)

The country was at war. The workers were urged not to lose a minute or a motion that could further the interests of the country. It was said that the war was a war of production, that is, the side which could produce more than the other would win. It was even said that a workman was fully as important as a soldier, and that no man who had the interests of his country at heart would lose a day, an hour, or a minute of working time, much less strike and penalize an essential industry. That, it was said, would mean sacrificing the lives of their dear ones who were perhaps dying for want of the materials which the workers alone make. ... You know the arguments, the Four-Minute Men told you all about it.

But some workers in different plants all over the country *did* strike—and won. Notably at Bridgeport, and in the ship-yards. They had been widely condemned, but got their rates and conditions. The general trend of public opinion, according to the voluble portion of the public, did not favor the use of power by labor. The concensus of opinion was that labor should wait in patience until after the war before resorting to extreme measures. (I never heard any one advocate that the employers should give the men what they wanted, and that the employers' side of the case would be adjusted after the war. The argument was all the other way.)

Having digressed somewhat to recall the conditions prevailing at the time, I shall resume the story.

Sturtevant's machinists had applied to the company for standard pay and wages; and been refused. They submitted their case to the War Labor Board, created to handle precisely this class of dispute during the war. The case was referred to them because of the prevailing conditions. It was dangerous, for that matter, for the men to consider a strike at that time. The cry of "pro-German" would greet every move of the workers to improve conditions or at any protest against conditions. This cry of "pro-German" has since been shown to have been started by those who were "on the pig's back," at any indication that they were to lose their privileges. Even the "people's representatives" in Congress were subject to their dirty, crafty attack. Moreover, there were special laws passed at this time, such as the so-called Work or Fight law. In theory all males of draft age were compelled to work 36 hours weekly at some essential occupation. But there weren't any millionaires coming to our shop to wheel a truck. Some store clerks, who had to give up their former jobs and do "menial" work, have been fired since the armistice; I don't know what they are doing now. There were also stringent laws against "sedition." The army was raised through the Selective Draft. If a man had a family, he was given deferred classification. The threat was made in several papers that in case of a strike, the men would be drafted and placed in labor batallions, and put to work at their regular occupations on army pay.

You remember these conditions, and more which I have omitted. They all acted to prevent the men from striking to better their conditions. ...

The War Labor Board considered the case of the Machinists and the Sturtevant Co. It sent a conciliator, Mr. Sullivan, to adjust matters. He obtained a temporary increase of 15% for the men and a promise that there would a further adjustment whereby the men would get the standard pay of the craft, when the Board had decided the question as a whole in conjunction with other plants doing the same kind of work. Sturtevant was and still is one of those noble institutions believing in the sacred right of private contract. There are no two men getting the same rate for the same work.

The union stirred up the War Labor Board from time to time for a decision. But the Board delayed from day to day, week to week, month to month, reserving a decision for one reason or another.

Then the armistice was signed. Everybody was hysterically happy. That is, all the workmen were. I can't speak for the others. There was no work that day. We got the band out and paraded the town. In our working clothes, a cheering howling mob. We knew some of us would lose our jobs on account of the war's end. But what did any man care for a job when he knew that the workers no longer would be driven to be killed and to kill? In all, it was a glorious day, but it was the day when the tables were turned on the workers. Where previously they had the power, if only they had used it, to enforce their demands, from that day on this power was gone. Their strategic position due to the war was no more.

It is true that another Four-Minute Man came to the shop, saying, "Stick to your jobs." He had word "direct from Washington" that our company "had contracts for three years more of Government work," and that the men were going to get a "square deal." What he told us about the demobilization of the army and its effect on the labor situation went right over our heads. We didn't get the threat—that is, some of us didn't.

Well, the union gave the War Labor Board another gentle prod to render a decision; in fact, several prods. There was also a tightening of discipline in the shop. Demobilization was going on. The "labor market" was "easing," the time was about right for the "law of supply and demand" to become operative *as applied to labor*. ... Anyone who said too much now was Bolshevik; jail him, if possible, fire him at least. Plenty of labor. Lot's of it. Hire men cheaper, in fact. ...

The union agitated the War Labor Board again and again; finally it secured a decision. The Board decided that the men should have standard rates, and that they should be retroactive. But the Board rendered no decision as to who should pay the men's back wages due under their decision. The management of Sturtevant say they cannot pay, that it is up to the Government to pay. They made their price using the old wage as a basis. (Their price to the Government was 70% above list prices, in some instances.) They cannot pay, cannot afford to pay; their argument is that as the Government decided the men should get more pay, the Government should provide the means.

The union applied to the Navy Department for whom the work was done, and were notified by Secretary Daniels that the Department would not pay.

The union has had legal advice that nothing can be done about it.

Apparently, nothing doing. A strike would be welcome to the company now, as all other departments would continue to work, and the condition of the labor market is such that they could probably break a strike and put the union out of business.

Meanwhile the men have practically given up hope. They have a "moral victory." It is conceded that the money is due them. The only trouble is that nobody will pay it, nor even agree who should pay it. Try it on your landlord or grocer. Tell him you concede the amount of the bill, but that some one else should pay it. I think this could be worked out into a system. If he puts you in jail for not paying him, call him a Bolshevik. That will shut him up.

Debs and Developing Mass Action in Toledo

By A. Schwarzenfeld

Secretary, Workers', Soldiers' and Sailors' Council

THE final speech of Eugene Debs, before going to prison, was to have been made in Toledo on March 30. Arrangements were made to meet Debs at Union Station Sunday morning. Mayor Schreiber declared that no demonstration would be permitted and that Debs could not speak in Memorial Hall. We decided to proceed with matters as arranged, and the names of twenty Reds were secured who were willing to go to prison.

Sunday morning was chilly, but all went to the station at ten o'clock. More than one thousand workers were there waiting for Debs. Word came that Debs was ill, but would come on the afternoon train. Then Comrade Mike Toohey, the local Socialist Party organizer, spoke to the crowd in the station for fifteen minutes. A police lieutenant threatened to arrest him if he did not stop speaking. I was asked to be ready to speak if Toohey was arrested. It was then decided to parade to Socialist Hall—a line four blocks long, singing revolutionary songs. "Down with the capitalists!" "Three cheers for the Bolsheviki!" We passed a police station, and two patrol wagons joined the parade....

Socialist Hall was packed with workers and enthusiasm. The announcement was made that 300 Reds from Detroit were coming to Toledo in two special cars, and 500 of us went to the station to greet the reinforcements. Cheers and shouts greeted the Detroit comrades, an impromptu meeting was held, and then we adjourned to Socialist Hall, the situation being explained by Bob Topping, Treasurer of the Communist Propaganda League. On the way we passed Memorial Hall—5000 people were waiting for the hall to open to hear Debs. Here we got the news that thirty speakers had been arrested. The 300 Reds from Detroit were marshalled by the soldiers; and as they neared the hall the sang an adaptation of "The Red Flag:" "Hold the jail for we are coming, Socialists stand firm; Side by side we battle onward, Victory will come." I began to speak, while the Detroit comrades held hands to prevent the police breaking through. Then the crowd swept the police away. I climbed a tree to speak, when detectives placed me under arrest. Six of the Detroit comrades went on sympathetic arrest. Then the crowd spoke; six policemen "went on strike," and six were injured, three being taken to the hospital. The crowd was beyond control—by the police.

At the prison we learned that more than seventy comrades were in cells. We organized a Soviet, and elected delegates to negotiate with the Chief of Police.

Reports of events reached us. The police refused to arrest any more Socialists, although a dozen Yipsel lassies insisted upon being arrested as a protest. The crowd took things into its own hands, and marched toward the prison, in spite of the soldiers. At the prison, the crowd demanded the immediate release of the imprisoned Socialists, under threat of breaking into the prison. After a parley, the Chief of Police agreed to release all the Socialists. In the waiting room, an American soldier said: "I went across to fight for democracy, and I'm still fighting for it." The Chief of Police then tried to "put one over" by keeping under arrest for assault a Detroit comrade. We insisted and the crowd insisted under threat of action, that all should be released. Then came a demand from the crowd that I should speak, and this ultimatum broke the will of the Chief of Police. All were released on our own terms. I spoke to the crowd about the necessity of Workers and Soldiers Councils; fifteen thousand men and women, with raised hands, signalized their intention to join.

This mass demonstration lasted two and one half hours. I believe it is the first time in the United States that 75 men under arrest were released two hours after arrest upon the threatening demand of a mass of people, acting on its own initiative. ... One of the Detroit comrades expressed their sentiments thus: "When we read in the leaflet of the Workers', Soldiers' and Sailors' Councils that you were trying to develop mass action, our 'theoreticians' in Detroit said that mass action is mob action, and doesn't get anywhere. I see now that six months' agitation for mass action may bring preliminary results. If any one now wants me to tell them how mass action acts, I'll tell them I saw an elementary form of mass action that took 75 men out of jail." Out of this crude expression of mass action will develop the higher and final form, for the Revolution.