

PRE-CONVENTION DISCUSSION

Convention Problems of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union

By ROSE WORTIS.

FRIDAY, JUNE 6, will mark the opening of the second rank and file convention of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union.

Unlike the pre-convention periods of the company unions, which are characterized by intrigues, maneuvers and frauds between the various cliques interested in sending their hand-picked supporters to the pre-arranged, steam-rolled conventions, our pre-convention period was a time during which the leadership of the union, as well as the entire mass of the membership, made a thorough review of the policies, tactics, achievements and shortcomings of the past, and outlined a clear policy for the future.

In the beginning of our pre-convention discussion an article appeared in the Daily Worker and the Freiheit which critically analyzed the struggle in the needle trades for the past few years up to and after the formation of the Industrial Union, and the reasons why the Industrial Union despite favorable objective conditions failed to crystallize its ideological control over the needle trades workers organizationally.

This article gave rise to widespread discussion and met with serious objections, particularly on the part of the organized Lovestone group within the Industrial Union.

What were the objections raised by the opposition?

(1) That this article with its criticism of our mistakes will be taken advantage of by the enemy and will be used to discredit the union. (2) That the aim of the article is to injure the growth of the Industrial Union and reduce it to a sectarian group. (3) Many of the oppositionists contended that the mistakes alluded to in the article do not actually constitute mistakes in themselves; that the incorrect policies indicated in the article were dictated by necessity and will have to be repeated in the future.

As far as the first argument is concerned, namely, that the enemies will take advantage of this criticism, it is not new. Whenever any revolutionary organization has attempted to exercise self-criticism, those who lacked the courage inevitably raised this argument. The policies of a revolutionary organization are never dictated by what the enemy will say, but by what is correct and by what can best serve the interests of the movement. A specific illustration of this is the recent discussion on the question of collectivization in the Soviet Union. No doubt many of those responsible for the mistakes in the application of the collectivization policy were the very ones to oppose self-criticism on the ground that the enemy will interpret it as a retreat. However, the leaders of the Soviet Union knew that only through merciless self-criticism can these shortcomings be corrected, and time itself has corroborated the truth of this contention. The criticism of Stalin against those who misapplied the correct policy has not meant a retreat for the Soviet Union, but on the contrary has helped the success of the collectivization policy.

The second argument sounds strange indeed, especially coming from those who have segregated themselves from the revolutionary movement, who are operating as an isolated group, separate and apart, and are fast degenerating from a left wing opposition in a right wing union to a right wing opposition in a left wing union.

Now as to the political line of the article and the relation of the struggle in the needle trades to the general struggle of the labor movement in the U. S. A. The main points of criticism raised in the article are as follows:

(1) That we failed to properly understand the developments of the industry, and to shape our policies in accordance with the new developments of the situation.

(2) That we did not properly estimate the role of the fascist leadership of the A. F. of L.

(3) That we carried over some of the old practices of compromise with the police and in some respects (the dress strike) pursued a policy of class-collaboration with the employers.

(4) That we failed to reorganize our union on the shop delegate system, and to develop mass activity of the workers in order to meet the problems confronting us.

(5) That we continued functioning as an opposition even after the organization of the Industrial Union, and failed to give independent leadership to the workers' struggles.

Is there any truth in this criticism raised in the articles?

Now, after several years of bitter struggle, when in a sober frame of mind we review our past struggles and activities and closely analyze the situation, we find that this criticism is correct and largely explains the reasons why the Industrial Union despite favorable objective conditions did not develop as a mass organization.

One of the most serious mistakes, in my opinion, was our failure to understand the treacherous role of the trade union bureaucracy. This was but the logical result of the general failure of the left wing and of the Communist Party (under the leadership of Lovestone) to properly understand and estimate the economic situation of the country, the strength of American capitalism and its fascist agents in the labor movement.

This was most glaringly illustrated in our tactics and policies after the struggle of the Joint Action Committee. As a consequence of this lack of proper evaluation, we did not recognize that the struggle of the Joint Action Committee was not a fight between two wings in the labor movement, but a class struggle fight in which the Sigman gang merely acted as an agency of the bosses. We continued to believe that there was a possibility of working in union with Sigman and failed to utilize the victorious struggle of the Joint Action Committee in order to entrench ourselves for the coming sharper struggles. This belief was also shared by the leadership of the Communist Party. I clearly recall one typical instance during the cloakmakers strike, when Ben Lifshitz, after listening at a strike meeting to one of the militant speeches made by Sigman (who was then secretly conspiring to sell out the strike), expressed the opinion that he believed Sigman to be sincere and that he really desired to see the strike won. Our belief that Sigman and his supporters

were merely reactionary labor leaders instead of agents of the bosses, led us to adopt many wrong policies, the most glaring of which was the development of the one-front theory, particularly during the cloakmakers strike in 1926; namely, that we cannot fight the reactionary machine and the bosses at the same time; that first we must defeat the bosses and then take up the struggle against the Sigman-Ninfa machine. It was this incorrect understanding, these wrong policies that led us to permit Ninfa, who had openly betrayed the strike, to remain on the strike committee. This wrong policy was responsible for the fact that, while seeing clearly the treacherous activities of Halpern—that he was drawing hundreds of thousands of dollars from the strike treasury to organize his machine to fight against the union and to sell out the strikers—we still permitted him to remain on the out-of-town committee and voted the appropriation for his traitorous work.

As a militant trade union based on the class struggle, our union should have been the first to follow up the developments of the industry, the relation of forces, and work out policies accordingly. Instead of doing this we merely drifted. In many instances we did not even see the developments in the industry; the fact that the needle industry, just as the other industries, was becoming centralized and controlled by finance capital, despite the superficial appearance of decentralization. We did not take note of the big mergers that were being made in the industry, and even in instances where we did take note of these developments we failed to adopt any measures to explain the significance of these developments to the workers or to adopt policies to meet the new situation; hence we also failed to appreciate fully the role played by the state in our struggles, and were not fully prepared to combat the combined attacks of the powerful enemies.

Our failure in this respect led us into a policy of helping to organize employers' associations and maneuvering with these associations in the hope of getting them to split with the company-union and to recognize our union.

Subsequent events proved the incorrectness of our policy and demonstrated very clearly that had we devoted ourselves to mobilizing the mass of the workers for struggle and laid less hope on maneuvers, our union would have been in a much stronger position than it is today.

Along with this policy came also the policy of compromise with the police, which brought untold injury to our struggle. The carrying over of these wrong practices from the old corrupt unions has created illusions amongst the workers that the police can be utilized in their struggles against the bosses. It has paralyzed the fighting energy of the workers and has led them to rely on forces outside of themselves for winning their struggle against the bosses.

The same was also true in our methods of carrying on organization work. While theoretically we recognized that the old methods of doing organization work through small committees were wrong, and in some instances we made a real effort to conduct our organization work on a mass scale, nevertheless we were not persistent in developing these proper instruments of struggle. While advocating the urgent necessity of mass organization work, we continued to rely on the small committees.

This resulted in developing amongst the workers the psychology that the organization of their shops was not their task; that they were merely to sit in the shop and wait for some outside union committee to come and bring them down to the office of the union. How often did we meet with a situation where a large group of left wingers were working in an open shop and when asked why they did not organize their shop they would answer that the union did not send a committee.

The present pre-convention discussion has led many a worker to recognize the truth of this criticism leveled against us by the Trade Union Unity League, and as a result of this discussion the workers are gradually beginning to recognize that the union will never be built by a small group of workers, but only through the active participation of the mass of the workers in the organization work, as well as the other activities of the union.

Now as to the structure of our organization. From its very inception, the left wing in the needle trades recognized that the local craft form of organization has outlived its usefulness. Some of the earliest struggles of the left wing were fought on the issue of reorganizing the union on a shop delegate basis. This issue was the cause of many expulsions. Yet, when the left wing gained control, and even after the organization of the Industrial Union, the recognizing the necessity for the shop delegate system, we hesitated to put it into effect. In 1925 our failure to establish the shop delegate system and carry through amalgamation was due to our wrong estimation of the role of the Sigman machine and our desire to maintain peace at any price, even though it meant the sacrifice of one of the basic points of the left wing program.

Our failure to properly analyze and correct this grave error of 1925, led us to repeat the same mistake during the organization of the Needle Trades Workers' Industrial Union, when we yielded to the pressure of the so-called middle group (Shelly, Horowitz, etc., who in reality had already directly aligned themselves with the Sigman machine), and instead of launching our union from its very inception on the shop delegate system, we decided on a transition period, which weakened the strength of our organization and greatly hampered the successful development of the strikes, which came immediately after the organization of the Industrial Union.

Having started our Industrial Union on the wrong basis, with an eye to retaining the middle groups, we naturally also continued many other wrong practices. Though affiliated with the R.I.L.U., the comrades of the needle trades under the influence of the Lovestone leadership in the Communist Party continued a policy of exceptionalism. The experiences of the revolutionary movement throughout the

A Big Industrial Union Winning Conditions for the Needle Workers Will End Company Unions and Slave Contracts



THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNIST PRESS AND MARCH 6

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IN examining the campaign for the International Day of Fight Against Unemployment (March 6th), conducted by the Communist Party, we must start by examining the condition of the Party press before the E.C.C.I. and R.I.L.U. had arrived at the decision concerning March 6th. The following fact must be recognized: Although the unemployment problem has for a long time been very acute, the army of workless having grown to enormous dimensions, no systematic, prolonged and gradually intensified campaign was conducted in the majority of Party papers. It is true that as far as quantity is concerned, Communist newspapers, particularly in Germany and America, devoted much space to the unemployment question, but the main problems were treated in a very unsystematic manner. The idea of the joint struggle of the unemployed and the employed workers was not sufficiently sharply brought out, and was not applied along with all the principal conclusions to be deduced therefrom, to all important topical questions. The Berlin Rote Fahne, as also the German provincial press, in an agitational respect treated brilliantly the most urgent current topics, particularly the police terror against unemployed demonstrations. L'Humanité ignored the unemployment question. The London Daily Worker dealt with the unemployment movement quite unsystematically and did not treat it as the key problem in the present day economic and political struggles.

The March 6th campaign undoubtedly did cause a stir in all the papers. In dealing with the unemployed problem the field of vision widened, the international significance of unemployment began to be brought out, the organizational aspect of the March 6th campaign was given an agitational basis, the narrow parochial viewpoint which has often prevailed when examining problems of unemployment, now gave place to a broader outlook.

In this article it is our object briefly to describe the campaign conducted by the Party press of Germany, France, Great Britain and America. On our analysis we will distinguish between three phases of the campaign: (1) The campaign preceding March 6th, (2) the direct preparation (March 5th to 6th) and (3) the utilization of the March 6th experience.

During the first weeks of the campaign, no substantial change took place in the position of the press. Except for the publication of the Communist International manifesto and the treatment of everyday questions, the press still

bore no imprint of a campaign. It was only in the last two weeks that a real concentration on the unemployed movement or the preparation for March 6th was to be noted.

The conducting of the campaign must be estimated from the following aspects: (1) The linking up of current campaigns (March 6th, the anti-Soviet crusade, International Women's Day); (2) the line of campaign, the putting forward of basic viewpoints, the united front of employed and unemployed workers; (3) the movement in the factories; (4) the international character of the campaign; (5) methods of mass mobilization with the aid of the press; (6) the elucidation of main problems (world economic crisis, legality and illegality, social-fascism); information on the U.S.S.R.

It is from these aspects that we shall examine the most important Party papers.

On the eve of the March 6th campaign, the Berlin Rote Fahne, in accord with the situation in Germany, gave a prominent place to problems of unemployment and during the final weeks intensified the campaign. For example, the Rote Fahne devoted big top-of-the-page articles to mass unemployment and the struggle on February 25th, February 26th, February 28th, March 2nd, March 4th and March 5th. The most important central problems were dealt with in leading articles—it is true only partially (a leader on March 2nd on the question of the joint struggle of employed and unemployed workers, on March 6th concerning the fight for the streets, etc.). The strength of these articles lay in their live agitational treatment and correct emphasis of the significance of the struggle for the streets and also of the united front of employed and unemployed workers.

The campaign in the Rote Fahne, however, when examined from the aspects outlined above, discloses quite a number of defects and weak points, which can in no way be justified by referring to the pressure from many other campaigns, lack of space or other technical factors.

The first substantial defect in the campaign was that on the eve of March 6th the idea of the broad united front from below was not sufficiently used for propaganda by the press. This defect was noted by the recent Plenum of the C.C., C.P.G., as applying to many Party organizations as a whole. It is true, the necessity for a united front of employed and unemployed workers was constantly emphasized, but very little was said on the eve of March 6th of the necessity also to bring the social-democratic workers into this united front. Di-

rected attack of the combined forces of the enemy and to retain our ideological control over the workers. It was these achievements that created a base for the revival of our struggle in the needle trades now, when in self-criticism we are reviewing our shortcomings of the past and are laying down the correct policy for the development of our struggle.

The perspective for the struggle in the needle trades is good. The conditions of the workers are becoming more deplorable from day to day. The earnings of the workers in some sections of the industry have been reduced as much as 50 to 60 per cent. The 40-hour week has been abolished. Reorganizations are the order of the day. The full burden of the economic crisis in the industry has been placed on the shoulders of the workers. This is being done with the direct aid and support of the company unions. The illusions that many of the workers entertained with regard to the company union have been destroyed as a result of their experiences in the fake strikes. The company unions now stand exposed as the open fascist agents of the bosses. The company unions are maintained solely by the support of the bosses. The workers in ever larger numbers are beginning to recognize that only thru militant struggle under the leadership of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union will they be in a position to fight their most powerful enemies and win union conditions.

Despite these shortcomings in the course of our struggle, several very important achievements have been made. One of these was the mass defiance of injunctions, which had a far-reaching effect. The second was our ability, despite our shortcomings, to withstand the con-

centrated attack of the combined forces of the enemy and to retain our ideological control over the workers. It was these achievements that created a base for the revival of our struggle in the needle trades now, when in self-criticism we are reviewing our shortcomings of the past and are laying down the correct policy for the development of our struggle.

The second important defect of the campaign was the fact that the Rote Fahne, while dealing excellently with the ideological role of the C.P. in the fight against unemployment, ignored its organizational role. Throughout the whole campaign there was not a single article about the role of the factory cells. The page devoted daily to factory life, did not bear any imprint of the factory movement and devoted still less space to the united front from below. In general one finds in the Communist press, too many dry instructions and too few live accounts as to how the definite campaign in the factories has actually been prepared and conducted.

The third defect was the inadequate utilization of material on the U. S. S. R. The anti-Soviet campaign of the churches was not sufficiently linked up with questions of March 6th. Once (February 26th, but unfortunately, only once, information on socialist construction in the U.S.S.R. was given a prominent place—on the front page. The most important in-precise article on the fight against unemployment in the U.S.S.R. appeared after March 6th. In general the utilization of material on the tremendous successes of socialist construction is still quite inadequate, whereas the bourgeois press prints its false and sensational information about the U.S.S.R. on the first or second pages. The Rote Fahne has the bad habit of tucking away current news about the U.S.S.R. on the so-called third political page, where it does not sufficiently strike the eye. In that and certain other respects, we must point out the excellent way the campaign was conducted by the "Hamburger Volkszeitung."

With regard to illustrations (pictures, cartoons, etc.), this campaign was very weak. From the ideological standpoint it should be observed that such an important organ as the Rote Fahne should have given more attention also to the theoretical questions arising in connection with mass unemployment.

As far as L'Humanité is concerned, this paper, in the final weeks, devoted leading and top articles to the March 6th campaign almost every day. The international nature of the campaign was very well brought out. A politically weak point in the campaign, at the time of the French governmental crisis, was that in dealing with this crisis, the questions of the unemployed movement were relegated to the background. L'Humanité paid more attention than Rote Fahne did to the particular categories of workers. It appealed to civil servants and soldiers to take part in the March 6th demonstrations. The weakest point of the campaign in L'Humanité was also the treatment of the movement in the factories. We only found one small article on how the March 6th campaign was prepared in the factories. The editorial did not supply such articles with the proper commentary, calling upon other factories to follow the example set.

Information on the U.S.S.R. in the pages of L'Humanité throughout the whole campaign was just as inadequate as formerly. The daily publication of two or three telegrams on the U.S.S.R. for the information of the French workers was totally inadequate in view of the frantic anti-Soviet campaign going on in the whole French bourgeoisie press. On March 5th L'Humanité devoted a whole page to the U.S. S. R. and the material on unemployment was very well arranged, but this material was quite out of date. The very important new material on this question, however, the fact of the considerable decrease of unemployment in the U.S. S. R. was not utilized. This was a serious omission! The L'Humanité leading articles in a succinct and intelligible manner expounded the main ideas of the campaign and correctly advocated the E.C.C.I. slogans. The paper was very weak, however, in the way it dealt with the purely agitational treatment of the problems. Instead of making the paper an organizing factor in the factory campaign, L'Humanité restricted itself to agitation and propaganda.

As far as quantity is concerned the Daily Worker (London) contained a great deal of material on the question of unemployment and the March 6th campaign, but unfortunately, here quantity surpassed quality. Dull and boring treatment impaired or weakened even the best articles. The day-to-day slogans were monotonous and vapid. Such slogans as Fight against unemployment across a whole page, were not capable of setting the masses going and mobilizing them for the struggle. The biggest defect of the Daily Worker was that: the campaign was inadequately utilized to expose and pillory the treacherous character of the Labor government. Throughout the whole campaign quotations from the promises made to the unemployed by MacDonald and the Labor Party, on the eve of their entering the government, should have been printed in big type. The latest unemployment figures should have been constantly made to shout out from the columns, to make a striking impression. They should have been accompanied by illustrations and diagrams, but there was nothing of the sort. A great deal of material was published on the U.S.S.R., some of which was useful, but specific material on unemployment was not utilized. There was no distinction between the various categories of workers.

The main task of the union today is to crystallize our ideological control over the workers organizationally. Many important steps in this direction have already been taken by the union, with good results. The workers who in the past have regarded even the Industrial Union as something apart from themselves, are beginning to recognize that they alone through their own activities will make the Industrial Union the fighting weapon of the needle trades workers.

The organization of block and building committees will be the instrument for the development of the mass struggle. It is true that today only a small percentage of the workers are as yet taking an active part in these activities; but a start has already been made and with the proper following up of this work there is no doubt that before long the workers will recognize this fundamental change that has been made, and will come to look upon the Industrial Union as the organization that will lead them not only in their daily struggles but in the general struggles of the working class.

The drive for 10,000 new members launched by the Industrial Union though as yet not developed with the necessary impetus, is nevertheless an encouraging beginning of the campaign to strengthen and spread out the Industrial Union. The purpose of this drive is not merely to get individual members into the

the campaign, but to establish contact with the workers of the open shops, use these contacts for the purpose of organizing shop committees to develop the struggle under the leadership of the Industrial Union.

The attitude of the Lovestone group toward this drive, their attempt to ridicule it by comparing it with the 1926 drive of the Sigman machine, shows that already they are reaching a stage where they make no distinctions between the Industrial Union and the company union and see no difference between Sigman's drive to fool the workers into the company union and the drive of the Industrial Union to widen its base and draw in the unorganized into its fighting ranks.

The Trade Union Unity League, as the revolutionary center of the U.S.A., has asserted itself and performed its revolutionary duty toward the needle trades workers by calling the attention of the union to some of its shortcomings and by assisting with its guidance in leading the union on the proper revolutionary path.

The second convention of the Industrial Union will mark a turning point in the struggle of the needle trades workers. At this convention we will throw off the old outlived policies that have interfered with the growth and development of our union, and will go forth with greater determination to build a real revolutionary union of needle trades workers.

L'Humanité, while also omitting all criticism of the weak points of the campaign, emphasized in excellent leading articles after March 6, the role of the Comintern and the great international significance of the campaign.

The British Daily Worker after March 6 displayed an inadequate understanding of the new factors in the situation in England, as signaled by March 6—the significance of social-fascist terror in relation to the demonstrators. The role of the Party in utilizing the experiences of the campaign was not clearly brought out. Things were improved by the linking up of the campaign with subsequent campaigns (hunger march and First of May). In utilizing the March 6 experience, the estimation of the various demonstrations by the press also deserves attention. Rote Fahne immediately understood the great importance of the powerful demonstrations in America, and, except for certain exaggerations, gave a correct appreciation of their significance.

L'Humanité and Daily Worker (London), however, although on that occasion well supplied with information at first absolutely failed to realize the importance of the New York demonstration on March 6. The Daily Worker devoted a small part, to the New York demonstration. These errors were only rectified afterwards.

In summing up we must say that the utilization of the March 6 experiences by the entire Communist press was much feeble than the preparation for this campaign. This defect deserves special attention as it reflects one of the typical weaknesses of our press. What the last Plenum of the presidium of the E.C.C.I. said about the sections in general, is equally correct when applied to the Communist press: in all the work undertaken, agitation and propaganda outweighs the organization of the struggle. This by no means signifies that in agitation and particularly in propaganda, special efforts are not required. However, the process of the March 6 campaign undoubtedly has shown that the role of the Bolshevik press as an organizing factor in the movement must certainly be strengthened.

We have left untouched here a whole number of typical weaknesses and burning, unsolved problems of the Communist Party press, since they can only be elucidated by a detailed analysis of the general condition of our press. This is to be the subject of a special article.