

# The Struggle in the Needle Trades

By W. Z. Foster

THE sharpest point in the class struggle at the present time in the United States is in the needle trades. There the fight is intense. It is marked by unprecedented struggles of the masses under Left Wing leadership against the bosses and the treacherous right wing Socialist trade union officials. The center of the struggle now is the bitterly fought strike of the New York cloakmakers. This is only the latest phase of the long fight of the ideologically advanced clothing workers against the combined bosses and reactionary trade union leaders.

In brief, the situation in the clothing industry is this: The employers are trying to undermine the unions and to speed up the workers in production to an even more unbearable pace than exists at present. They are trying to company-unionize the needle trades unions, with the full support of the Socialist union leaders. The Left Wing is leading the struggle of the masses against this dangerous and destructive combination of employers and Socialist officials.

This is the heart of the great fight now going on all over the country in every branch of the needle trades, and which has manifested itself in many dramatic incidents, such as the Furriers' strike, the Joint Action Committee struggle in the I. L. G. W. U., etc. It is a struggle against the company unionization of the needle trades unions. In order fully to understand what is involved in this fight, however, it is necessary to trace briefly the growth of company unionism and company union tendencies both within and without the trade unions.

## The Growth of Company Unions.

Fifteen years ago, the policy of American employers, especially in basic and trustified industries, was one of a complete "open shop". That is, they prevented any kind of organization whatsoever among the workers. About 1912, however, they began to depart from this policy by organizing company unions, the first important one of which was established by the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company upon the conclusion of the historic Colorado coal miners' strike. The company union made slow progress until the war, when a tremendous advance along this line took place. The big employers established company unions in hundreds of important plants. The movement represented a radical change in policy on the part of these employers. Where they previously permitted no organizations whatever among their workers, they now set up so-called unions entirely controlled by the companies.

Company unions are a product of the efficiency engineers. Their basic purpose is to increase profits for the employers and to lull the workers into passive subjection to the most intense capitalist exploitation. Their specific aims are: 1. To facilitate the speeding up of the workers in industry. 2. To prevent the growth of

class-consciousness among the workers by the systematic cultivation of class-collaboration ideas. 3. To check the formation of trade unions by giving the workers at least a pretense of organization.

## Company-Unionizing the Trade Unions.

Advancing towards their goal of establishing workers' organizations which facilitate the introduction of speed-up systems in industry and check the growth of class-consciousness and trade unionism, the employers are pursuing the policy not only of establishing company unions outright, but also of systematically degenerating the trade unions in the direction of company unionism. In the latter course they are assisted by the surrender policy adopted by the reactionary trade union bureaucracy especially since the heavy defeats suffered in the last few years by the trade unions.

The bureaucrats, with only their own group interests in mind, are perfectly willing to sacrifice the interests of the masses by hamstringing the unions. They hope thereby that the employers will permit them to have at least some form of organization to collect dues from. In return, they will do fascist service for the employers and try to force the workers to accept the most intense exploitation.

Immediately after the war, the employers delivered a series of heavy attacks against the trade unions in practically every industry, steel, shoe, clothing, textile, building, meat packing, printing, coal, etc. In every instance the unions were either badly beaten or seriously weakened. The whole movement constituted the greatest defeat ever suffered by the labor movement in this country. The climax of this struggle was the national strike of the railroad shopmen in 1922. Because of the treachery of the railroad union leaders, this historic strike resulted in an overwhelming defeat for the unions. It broke the backbone of railroad unionism.

The reactionary trade union leaders of the whole movement, who had no taste for these great struggles, collapsed altogether after the shopmen's defeat. Then they began to introduce into the unions a whole series of new institutions and tendencies leading in the general direction of degenerating the trade unions into company unions. The process of company-unionizing the trade unions proceeded ever faster.

Its first important phase was the development of the B. & O. plan, which is an arrangement whereby the unions co-operate with the employers in speeding up production. This in itself was a long step in the direction of company unionism. The B. & O. plan, originated on the railroads, has since become in principle the official policy of the American Federation of Labor. It is the basis of the invitations recently issued by Matthew Woll to the employers of the United States to join hands with

the trade union leaders for increased efficiency in industry.

Hard upon the heels of the B. & O. plan, came the growth of trade union capitalism, the rejection of all forms of independent political action by the bureaucrats, and their complete surrender to the two old parties, the bitter war against the Left Wing and every semblance of progressiveism in the unions. The whole movement to company-unionize the trade unions has been recently summed up, so to speak, in the Watson-Parker railroad law, which was supported both by the railroad companies and the union leaders. This law legalizes company unionism on the railroads, outlaws strikes, virtually establishes compulsory arbitration, gives the Federal courts the right to pass upon industrial disputes, and sets up a close and poisonous collaboration between the railroad officials and the leaders of the railroad unions.

## Company-Unionizing the Needle Trades Unions.

The movement of the employers to company-unionize the trade unions extends to the needle trades as well as to the general labor movement. The needle trades employers are proceeding along the three general lines characteristic of company unionism and company union tendencies. They are speeding up the workers, smothering class consciousness and undermining the trades unions proper. In this program, they have the active support of the Socialist trade union bureaucracy.

The combined employers and bureaucrats are putting the speed-up system into effect in various ways. Hillman was the outstanding champion of it in the needle trades bureaucracy, with his notorious "standards of production," a system which is permeating the entire needle trades. Beckerman, Hillman's New York tool, is introducing the piece-work system, and Sigman, by adopting the "reorganization" plan of the employers, has opened the door wide to the speed-up among the cloakmakers. Everywhere and under every guise that the employers undertake to put into effect the basic principle of company unionism, the speed-up of production, they have the active assistance of the Socialist bureaucrats.

Company unionism puts forward class collaboration as a substitute for class struggle. The bureaucrats in the needle industry are fully in harmony with this. They have abandoned every semblance of radicalism, not to speak of revolutionary sentiments and policies. They are the leaders in the struggle against the left wing, being the first officials in the labor movement of this country to introduce an expulsion policy. Their program has become almost indistinguishable from that of the old Gompers bureaucracy. They have become bitter haters of Soviet Russia. They are saturated with corruption. They are ready tools in the employers' program of preventing the growth of class consciousness amongst the workers.

In the movement for the company-unionization of the trade unions there is no room for a fighting workers' policy. Hence, the labor bureaucracy everywhere bitterly resists all tendencies to build up the unions and to develop them into real fighting organizations. Turning tail on their many years' advocacy of industrial unionism, the Socialist needle trades bureaucrats,

are now rabid opponents of amalgamation. They have dropped the strike weapon. They believe the employers are too strong to be defeated. Their policy is one of conciliation and arbitration. They accept whatever terms the employers present to them. They are in full harmony with the leaders of the American Federated of Labor to strip the unions of their fighting qualities, and to turn them into spiritless organizations, closely akin to company unions, to co-operate with the employers in exploiting the workers.

Like the rest of the reactionary bureaucrats, the Socialist needle trades union leaders are coming to look upon themselves merely as agents of the employers. When the unions revolt against their treacherous policies, they undertake to rule them by the abolition of democracy, the carrying thru of fascist gangster methods, and the application of the black list in co-operation with the employers.

## The New York Cloakmakers' Strike.

The central issue of the strike of the 35,000 New York cloakmakers, which has kept that industry tied up for the last six months, is the demand of the employers for the right to a 10 per cent per year reorganization of their shops. Under this plan of reorganization the employers would have the right to discharge 10 per cent of their workers each year. The strike is the mass resistance to this arbitrary demand.

The reorganization plan of the employers is entirely in line with the general tendency to devitalize the trade unions. When they secure the right to fire 10 per cent of their workers for no specified reasons, they hold a tremendous weapon against the union. By means of it they can terrorize the workers in various ways. They can speed them up, with the implied threat that all those workers who do not work fast enough will be discharged when the reorganization takes place. They can also intimidate the more militant-minded workers on the same basis. They can systematically undermine the union and weaken it. For the employers the reorganization plan opens the door wide to the company-unionization of the cloakmakers' union. The fact that the union has the right to review discharge cases where discrimination because of militancy is charged will not protect the union from the working-out of the reorganization as here outlined.

As is the case in every industry when the employers come forward with their program to devitalize the trade unions, the right wing leadership strongly supported the infamous reorganization program of the cloak bosses. The left wing, on the other hand, met it with the most determined resistance, mobilizing the workers for struggle against it. The right wing leaders joined forces with the employers to put the reorganization into effect in spite of the opposition of the left wing and the broad masses.

The efforts of the cloak bosses and the right wing bureaucrats to force reorganization upon the New York cloakmakers, is one of the most shameful episodes in the history of the American labor movement. From the beginning it has been a strike-breaking enterprise. When the governor's commission recommended that the reorganization be put into effect in the cloak industry, the

right wing officialdom, led by Sigman, immediately accepted this report, although they knew that the workers were determined to strike against it. From that time on their policy has been to break the strike by open and secret treachery and to force the workers to accept reorganization as laid down by the governor's commission, whose award was merely a statement of the policy of the employers in the situation.

The strike-breaking activities of the Sigman administration, which have never been surpassed by the notorious Berry, have assumed a variety of forms. When Governor Smith, trying to make the report of his commission stand up, endeavored to force arbitration upon the striking cloakmakers, which would have meant the breaking of the strike and the establishment of the reorganization plan, Sigman, backed by the Jewish Daily Forward and the right wing bureaucracy in all the other needle unions, proposed a surrender to Governor Smith's demand. But the left wing was able to defeat this completely.

Throughout the strike the right wing systematically spread defeatism among the workers, declaring that the strike was hopeless and unnecessary. Wherever they held any posts in the strike machinery they used these positions to carry on an organized sabotage of the strike. In Philadelphia and other garment centers the Sigman administration permitted and openly encouraged the making of scab garments for the New York market. Everywhere the right wing openly sabotaged the collection of strike funds. When the general strike committee announced the floating of a loan among the rank and file of the needle trades workers, the Socialist reactionaries immediately attacked the whole proposition.

Beckerman, head of the New York joint board of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, even went so far in his opposition to the strike as to drive from the shops workers who ventured to raise funds in support of the cloakmakers. When meetings were called to organize strike collections, attempts were made to break them up by the use of professional gangsters. The notorious union strikebreaker, Berry, may well look with envy upon his new strikebreaking rival, Sigman.

The general result of this right wing policy was to greatly weaken the union in its fight against the bosses. When the settlement was finally made with the Industrial Council, the organization of the inside manufacturers, an important branch of the trade, the union was compelled to accept the reorganization plan with certain modifications, although the left wing leadership did succeed in establishing the 40-hour 5-day week, substantial increases in wages, and other concessions. The strikebreaking policy of Sigman was all too successful.

Then came negotiations with the American Association, the organization of the contractors. The Sigman administration entered into an alliance with these bosses against the New York joint board, which conducted the strike, stimulating them to make the most outrageous demands upon the workers. The union stood firm against these demands, and the American Association,

closely advised by and depending upon the support of Sigman and his group, attempted to lock out 15,000 workers. This has been aptly called "Sigman's lockout" by the workers. It failed completely. The union shattered this offensive, to the consternation of Sigman and his employer-allies.

As I write this, the strike is continuing in full vigor, but Sigman and his right wing general executive board are developing fresh attempts to destroy it. They have outlawed the New York joint board and the striking local unions, arbitrarily and illegally removing their officials from office and taking over the official leadership of the strike. They are preparing a treacherous settlement of the strike, probably by arbitration as the employers dictate. They have mustered all the professional gangsters employed by the various unions under their control and hope to succeed with these in ramming these arbitrary measures down the throats of the rebellious membership.

#### Sigman's Fascist Program.

Sigman's program is now fascist. He hopes to be able to terrorize the cloakmakers into submission. In this reactionary attempt he has the support of the whole right wing bureaucracy, not only in the needle industry, but also in the unions generally. Alarmed at the progress of the left wing in the needle, mining, metal and other industries, these reactionaries have raised the cry of "Clean out the Communists from the unions," and are attempting to put the movement into a frenzy on this issue. The illegal seizure of the strike and the suspension of the New York joint board is the first big move in the general campaign against the left wing.

The strength of the left wing leadership, in the needle trades as well as in the unions generally, is its militant defense of the workers' interests. In the I. L. G. W. U., as in the victorious furriers' strike, the overwhelming mass of the workers stand with the left wing and against the reactionary officialdom. They support the left wing strike policy. They endorse the left wing program of amalgamating all the needle trades craft unions into one powerful industrial union. They realize that the left wing is the only element in the union that has anything whatever of a progressive character for the workers.

In the wholesale attack that is now being delivered by the right wing, in combination with the employers, against the left wing and the big body of cloakmakers, the problem is to maintain a solid connection between the rebellious masses and the left wing leaders, to prevent the masses from becoming demoralized by the terroristic tactics of the right wing, which constitute an American brand of fascism. This is the price of victory in the needle industry and the left wing leadership, profiting from past mistakes, must and will learn to accomplish it. The present bitter struggle in the cloak industry is only one incident in the long struggle against the reactionaries which must culminate in the near future by the combination of all the needle trades unions into one industrial organization under left wing leadership.

# "Peasantry or Power"

By J. Louis Engdahl

THE title of this article is not original. It was used very recently by one of the speakers, Prof. Macy Campbell, head of the department of rural education, Iowa State Teachers' College, as the subject of his address before the Eighth Annual Meeting of the American Farm Bureau Federation in Chicago. It shows more clearly than anything else could the lines along which the American farmer is thinking. Especially in view of the fact that the Iowa farmers are the richest per capita in the nation.

"Peasantry" to the American farmer means mortgage foreclosures, tenantry, crop farming, the low state of the tiller of the soil when he can take all his belongings, including his family, in his rickety Ford flivver and wander seeking the service of a serf that is in the gift of some rapacious landlord.

The word "peasantry" has not long been on the tongue of the American farmer. It is only since the war that this word has crept into his vocabulary, with every indication, however, that it is going to stay there. The farmers' problem, especially in the corn and cotton belts, is the biggest issue before the present session of congress. It may speak the decisive word in the presidential election in November, 1928. As the farmer plunges toward peasantry, his problem challenges the common attention of all, more and more, and especially of the city worker who should be the natural ally of the toiler on the land.

#### The Changing Order.

The whole continent, for three centuries, has stretched westward before the American farmer. There has been plenty of rich free land sought out by the hardest elements of the American population, the pioneer moving toward the setting sun. The world's most intricate network of railroads has been laid down and placed at his disposal for the transportation of his products. Half the railroad mileage on all the continents is to be found in the United States. The latest types of agricultural implements have been invented and manufactured for him. Nowhere on earth is the tractor so universally used as in this country. A vast system of farm education with pretentious agricultural colleges in nearly every state, has been established. The estimated farm population on January 1, 1925, was 31,134,000, a slight drop from the previous year. Of these approximately 10,000,000 are gainfully employed, a mighty army producing greater staple crops of corn, wheat, hay, cotton, rice, potatoes, flaxseed and rye than any other country. The total value of all farm crops in 1919 was \$14,755,364,894 nearly trebling that of ten years before in 1909, of \$5,231,850,683. In 1920, there were 6,448,343 farms covering 905,883,715 acres.

#### But the Farmer Grows Poorer.

In spite of these vast advantages and the colossal sums measuring the total value of wealth produced, the fact remains that the farmer grows steadily poorer. He is the victim of the capitalist social order under which he lives and which takes its toll of profiteering on every hand. Strive as he may, often forcing his whole family including little children into the harness of production, the necessities of life won by the farmer grow ever more meager.

Great masses of farmers own neither land, cattle, nor farm implements necessary to till the soil. Railroads, grain elevator systems, packing houses, banks, ships that ply the waterways, all are in the hands of the private profiteer, with very few exceptions. These are all placed at his disposal, to be sure, but at what heavy toll is being revealed daily in new agonies imposed on the nation's farming population. Producers and consumers co-operatives offer little help.

Great trusts in transportation, farm implement manufacturing, control of the collection and selling of the products of the fields, and above all, in money, hold the farmers helpless in their grip. The farmer on the land, like the wage worker in industry, becomes merely the human element in production for profit, victim of all the super-tortures that capitalism inflicts.

#### Millions Seek an Escape.

Millions seek an escape thru flight to the cities, where they arrive, bankrupt and penniless, to become the competitors in industry of the city workers. The very fact that crops are large after an abundant harvest, of itself forces prices down below the cost of production, resulting in the inevitable bankruptcy, or the mortgage that leads as a first step toward the same goal.

Scott Nearing, the economist, following a tour to the Pacific coast declares that, "In the southwestern states the radical tenant farmers are not even picking their cotton. If they did the landlords would get it all. Instead, they hire out to pick the cotton for the landlords on adjoining farms. In this way the farmer at least gets wages." But he also falls from his more favored position of tenant farmer into that of farm worker, or merely another "hired hand".

#### Percentage of Landless Grows.

According to the United States census, each passing decade has seen an increase in the percentage of landless tenant farmers. In 1889 it was 26 per cent; in 1900 it was 35 per cent; in 1920 it was 38 per cent. Seven states have almost reached the 50 per cent mark and in two, more than 50 per cent of the farmers are now landless.