

The 1919 Steel Strike Has Valuable Lessons for the Steel Workers Who Have Just Been So Crassly Betrayed, Says William Z. Foster, Veteran Labor Leader

By WM. Z. FOSTER

THE gutting of the steel strike movement and the turning over of the whole situation to Roosevelt constitutes one of the greatest betrayals in the history of the American labor movement. The great masses of the steel workers were undoubtedly ready to fight. If they had been given leadership, doubtless they would have developed a tremendous struggle, one that would have surely resulted in establishing trade unionism firmly in the steel industry, and carried through other demands.

But this perspective was terrifying to the reactionary labor leadership of the A. A. and the A. F. of L. No less than the steel companies and the government which, as faithful lackeys of the employers, dreaded such a strike. So they spared no efforts to dynamite the whole business and, unfortunately, they have succeeded. They have administered a great defeat to the steel workers.

Especially contemptible in this debacle was the role of the "Committee of Ten" leaders. They had the confidence of the rank and file who wanted action. Yet they proved themselves the cheapest demagogues and double-crossers. After filling the press with dire threats of bloody struggle, they went into the convention and followed like meek lambs the treacherous lead of Tighe and Green. They accepted tamely Green's proposition, which is essentially the company union program of the steel companies and Roosevelt.

Brothers Under the Skin

Their conduct in so doing is inexcusable. It is nonsense to say simply that they were inexperienced and outwitted by the old labor fakery. They have demonstrated that when it comes to a pinch their policy is the same as that of the ultra-reactionary Tighe. Their surrender was a vote of confidence in the corrupt Tighe administration, the crooked Green leadership and the enemy of labor, Roosevelt. They have crassly betrayed the steel workers and have disqualified themselves for rank and file leadership.

JUST as the 1919 strike was about to begin, the A. F. of L. leader-

ship and the government made a similar effort to break it up. In my book, "The Great Steel Strike and its Lessons," I pointed out the general lines along which this strike-breaking attempt was made and how we successfully combatted it. It may be fitting, however, to cite the following more detailed statement, written several months ago and taken from my forthcoming book entitled "From Bryan to Lenin," an account of my personal experiences in the labor movement:

"In the New York Worker of April 4, 1922, Samuel Gompers charges me with responsibility for the 1919 steel strike as follows: 'This is the same Foster, who in the face of definite information that the United States Steel Corporation was prepared for and wished a strike in 1919 and in the face of a request of the President of the United States that the strike be at least postponed, insisted upon that disastrous struggle.' I am proud to accept this responsibility; for never was a strike historically more necessary than that of the steel workers in 1919. To have adopted Gompers policy of 'postponing' the strike in accordance with President Wilson's wishes, would have amounted to the rankest betrayal of the steel workers and the complete demoralization of their movement.

"The situation was the following: After a bitter year's struggle in the face of A. F. of L. sabotage and Steel Trust terrorism we had organized 250,000 steel workers, they had formulated their demands, presented them to the Steel Trust, been refused a conference, had taken a national strike vote, and set a strike date for Sept. 22, 1919. As for the companies, they had completely suppressed free speech and the right to hold meetings throughout Pennsylvania and were discharging our workers everywhere by the thousands, at least 30,000 being already on the streets. The workers, correctly, were all set for the strike, the first time they had ever had a chance to deal a real blow at their Steel Trust oppressors.

"It was at this critical juncture, on Sept. 11, that President Wilson publicly demanded a postponement of the strike until after his National Industrial Conference, which, beginning on Oct. 6, was to set about establishing industrial peace between Capital and Labor in the United States. Gompers, without

consulting us, at once gave out a public statement endorsing Wilson's demand and also calling upon us to postpone the strike. Then, showing a concerted movement to wreck this strike, there poured into our National office, a stream of endorsements of Wilson's and Gompers' stand from a majority of the International Union Presidents who made up the National Committee for Organizing the Iron and Steel Workers. Let me cite some of these herewith:

"I wish to be recorded as in favor of complying with the President's request."—W. H. Johnston, Pres. Int'l. Assoc. of Machinists.

"Engineers will abide by suggestion of President Wilson that we delay action until after labor conference at Washington."—M. Snellings, Pres., Stationary Engineers.

"The Executive Board of the Bricklayers, Masons and Plasterers International Union desires action in steel strike postponed till after industrial conference in Washington."—Wm. Bowen, Pres.

"It is our opinion that there should be no strike called until after the October conference."—J. R. Alpine, Pres., Plumbers and Steamfitters.

"A strike at this time would be very inopportune."—M. F. Ryan, Pres., Bro. Railway Carmen.

"It will be better to postpone the calling of the strike until after President Wilson's conference of Oct. 6."—Wm. Atkinson, Acting Pres., Boilermakers. "We oppose a strike in the steel industry until after the adjournment of the industrial meeting called by President Wilson."—J. Wilson, Pres., Patternmakers.

"Several other union presidents affiliated to our committee sent similar notifications by wire or through local representatives. As for the officials of the Amalgamated Association, they had been against the entire organizational campaign and strike movement from the very start, openly opposing and covertly sabotaging every phase of it. The overwhelming majority of our National Committee was against the strike. In fact, the only Presidents who opposed postponement were those of the Blacksmiths and the Mine, Mill and Smeltermen.

A Tricky Postponement

"We were in a real crisis indeed. Here we were confronted with a

Misleader of Labor



MICHAEL TIGHE
President of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Tin and Steel Workers, a devoted servant of the steel barons.

Leader of Labor



WILLIAM Z. FOSTER
Leader of the Steel Strike of 1919, who will expose the heads of the A. F. of L. in his forthcoming book.

demand from the President of the United States, backed by Gompers and a great majority of our National Committee, that our strike be called off. And worse yet, this demand was framed in such an insidious way as to make it appear that what was involved was only a short postponement until the whole matter could be adjusted by "Labor's friend," President Wilson, at his widely heralded conference.

"As for myself, I was convinced that any postponement of the strike would mean a terrific disaster. I had not the slightest confidence in Wilson's doing anything for the steel workers, nor his October conference made up of "Capital," "Labor" and the "Public." Even a short postponement would demoralize the workers by wrecking their confidence in us and by throwing them at the mercy of the employers who were then discharging them by thousands all over the steel industry. Any attempt to postpone the strike would doubtless wreck the unions in a swelter of confusion and wildcat strikes. The whole movement would inevitably be destroyed. Incomparably better would be an open struggle, even if it were lost. In the first place the workers

were strongly organized, 250,000 of them, and had a good chance in a strike and secondly, the only way to secure any possible consideration from Wilson's conference was to hang a great strike over its head. I was, therefore, firmly convinced of the absolute necessity of the strike and I resolved to do all in my power to make it go on in spite of all the official opposition.

"But what was to be done? Simply to call the National Committee together would have been suicidal, as a majority were for postponing the strike. It was also impossible to put out a vote to the workers as to call a big, representative rank and file conference, as it was only a few days before the strike date and already the workers were becoming demoralized by all the talk in the newspapers and by company agents about the proposed calling off of the strike. So, upon my own responsibility, I wired and phoned our field organizers, at least 95 per cent of whom were honest and wanted earnestly to have the steel workers organized, to express their opinion and that of their local steel councils. Immediately I got a flood of telegrams, showing an overwhelming mass demand for the

strike and against postponement. Some of the more important of these are as follows:

"Unless you call the strike before Friday morning we will be forced to take matters into our own hands."—Gary and South Chicago Steel Councils in Joint Session.

"General Committee of all unions at Bethlehem unanimously voted to demand strike action by your committee."—Dave Williams, Organizer. "We cannot be expected to meet the enraged workers who will consider us traitors if strike is postponed."—Organizers of Youngstown District. "It is imperative that the strike be not postponed as the result will be a demoralization of our forces and the creating of a situation that will be positively dangerous."—District Organizing Secretaries of Youngstown, Rankin, Braddock, Homestead, Butler, Pittsburgh, Johnstown, Wheeling, Steubenville, Buffalo.

"Such telegrams were supplemented by scores of reports of field organizers in the same vein. As for John Fitzpatrick, Chairman of our National Committee, he agreed with my size-up of the situation, though he had little faith in strikes in general.

Make A. F. L. Fakers Back Down

"Here was a head-on conflict between the masses of steel workers, led by the field organizers, and the reactionary A. F. of L. officialdom. We made it quite clear to the leaders that if they attempted to postpone the strike it would go on anyway in spite of them. It was soon evident to them that they could not dare such a chance. They were fearful of the consequences to themselves. At the National Committee meeting which decided the matter and which, as usual, was made up almost entirely of field organizers, the sentiment against postponement was so strong that Tighe and other top officials present had to retract. We, therefore, sent a telegram to Gompers in which it was said: 'Postponement would mean absolute demoralization and utter ruin for our movement. It would be a thousand times better for the entire labor movement that we lose the strike and suffer complete defeat.' We insisted upon every effort being made to win the strike.

"So, we rejected the demand of

Wilson, Gompers and the union heads in the steel campaign. They had to back up and give the strike their 'endorsement', though they sabotaged it all the more viciously. The great strike went on, as per schedule. It was a bitter struggle. Twenty lost their lives, thousands were clubbed, shot, arrested. The masses made heroic sacrifices. But the strike was finally lost and we called it off on Jan. 8, 1920. At least the workers had had a chance to fight. And the strike could have been won hands down had the heads of the A. F. of L. and Railroad Brotherhoods ceased their strike-breaking sabotage and given the embattled steel workers even a modicum of assistance.

"The later course of the National Industrial Conference showed that we were quite right in having no confidence whatever in it. At this time the employers nationally were just launching into the greatest open shop drive in American labor history. They were organizing a tremendous offensive to wrest back from the workers all the concessions, in conditions and organization, that they had won during the course of this offensive. Nearly every union in the country had to wage a desperate struggle against being crushed. Under these circumstances, of course, it would have been folly to expect Wilson's conference to chastise the militant Steel Trust and to force it to grant our demands. The National Industrial Conference, made up of the greatest employers in the country, had to and did reflect their militant antagonism to Labor. It was so hostile to Labor that hardly had it met when it split over the steel strike and even the reactionary Gompers clique had to walk out of it.

Won Certain Conditions

"Clearly the only chance for the steel workers to win was by an effective strike and strike hard they did. Had we postponed our strike it would have thrown the steel workers at the mercy of the employers. Our forces would have been swiftly cut to pieces and have gone down to ignominious defeat without even striking a blow. The great steel strike of 1919 was completely justified. Although it was broken, it was by no means all lost. It shattered the 12 hour day in the steel industry, improved general

conditions over many years, and, far more important, it taught the steel workers that they could organize and bring this great industry to a standstill in spite of the Steel Trust's supposedly invincible defense of spy systems, welfare systems, company unions and every other known device for terrorizing and deluding the workers. Gompers' charge that I was responsible for this epochal strike I take as a great, if altogether unintended, compliment."

SO MUCH for the history of the 1919 strike. The need was no less great for going through with strike action in 1934 in spite of the strike-breaking tactics of Tighe, Green and Roosevelt. Nothing but demoralization, disorganization and defeat can come from following their policy. A militant strike at this time, paralyzing the whole industry would have brought the steel barons to their knees for, with the great wave of radicalization now among the workers generally and the splendid fighting spirit of the steel workers, a strike now would have been carried through with far better chances of winning than in 1919.

The betrayal of the Committee of Ten, jointly with the Tighe-Green clique, has done great damage. But the workers, with their splendid fighting spirit, will not be completely demoralized if the militants among them will hold them together and give them a new perspective of struggle. Events of the next period will expose the hollowness of the sell-out arrangements, and a great strike will become clearly necessary. We must prepare for that strike. The workers must take full charge of the A. A. from top to bottom, thrusting aside the Tighe and Committee of Ten misleaders. The Steel and Metal Workers Industrial Union must redouble its efforts to organize the unorganized. Then, with the A. A. and the S. & M. W. I. U. going jointly together with a united front movement and the whole under real fighting leadership, the steel workers can and will carry through a great strike that will dwarf 1919 and result in a tremendous victory.

Join the Red Builders!
Earn Expenses Selling "Daily"