

# TRADE UNIONS AND THE PEOPLES HEALTH

By  
**William Z. Foster**

## C. P. Chairman Urges Workers to Make It No. 1 Business

The workers' right to health should become a central trade union demand. In the broad movement now developing throughout the country in defense of the people's health the trade unions should take more and more a leading part, because it is the workers more than any other section of the population who suffer most from sickness and lack of proper medical care. Such health work by the unions is directly in line with their main efforts to reduce poverty, the greatest cause of sickness. The A. F. of L. and C. I. O. unions, especially the latter, are displaying considerable activity in the health question, but they need greatly to intensify their efforts. The purpose of this article is to indicate the main channels along which trade union health work can most profitably advance.

### FOR A FEDERAL HEALTH PROGRAM

Trade unions, in developing health activities, should have as their starting point the principle that the state has a basic responsibility for the people's health. For, as Mr. Parran, U. S. Surgeon General, has correctly stated, "The health of the people is the concern of the government." Hence, the central objective of the unions, in health work must be the development of a federal health program. This means concretely that the trade unions, by resolutions and otherwise, should actively support the Wagner National Health Bill (S. 1620), which is based upon the health program adopted by the recent National Health Conference, sponsored by the Roosevelt Administration. In addition to this, the unions should also demand federal compulsory health insurance, to include both employed and unemployed, a need which is not covered by the Wagner Health Bill. The unions should also be militant champions of a broad federal slum clearance program, to remove these deadly breeders of sickness.

In the respective state legislatures the unions should work to enforce and strengthen existing health laws and to introduce new legislation providing for the elimination of industrial diseases, for the extension of protective medical work, for improved compensation in accidents and sickness, for special health measures to protect women and youth, for closer attention to Negro health problems, for medical surveys of notoriously bad hunger and disease areas in cities and specific industries, for protection of food and drug supplies, for rural health centers, for increased medical attention to the lower income groups, etc. WPA funds should be demanded for these necessary tasks.

In the various municipalities the unions should be equally active politically, together with all other interested groups, in furthering local slum removal projects, in the struggle for more medical and dental clinics, health centers and better hospital facilities generally, in guarding the milk supply, in providing school lunches and playgrounds for children, in developing proper health education, in protecting the wage and working conditions of the medical personnel, and in the hundred and one other private and public health projects, such as mother and child care, anti-tuberculosis, anti-syphilis campaigns and similar movements. The trade unions should also see to it that their membership fully utilize existing public medical facilities in the cities, and in doing this they should fight against all notions that free medical care has about it the taint of pauperism. What can be done along these lines is now being indicated by the New York Furriers' Union, which is having 20,000 of its members examined free for tuberculosis by the New York Health Department.

### HEALTH DEMANDS UPON THE EMPLOYERS

In addition to making health demands upon the government—federal, state and local—the trade unions should also hold the employers directly responsible for the health of the workers engaged in their industries, and also for their unemployed. Far more than they have done up till now, the trade unions should insist upon clauses in their collective bargaining agreements providing for healthful working conditions, plant clinics for first aid and hospitals for regular medical treatment, pay for sick leave, annual vacations with pay, rest homes and sanitoriums for the workers, summer camps for the workers' children, etc.

In plant medical systems the unions should aim at placing all the cost upon the shoulders of the employers, where it belongs. The unions should also demand a voice in shaping plant health regulations and practices. Likewise, they should exercise care to prevent employers from using medical records for blacklisting active union workers. The whole question of factory medical care and the relation of the unions thereto assumes especially great importance in one-industry



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towns and in the mass production industries recently organized by the C. I. O. In many such towns and industries the bosses, under former open shop conditions, set up medical systems of one sort or another, often paid for wholly or in part by the workers, and the unions should examine into them carefully.

### UNION RELATIONS WITH PRIVATE MEDICAL INSTITUTIONS

Besides making health demands upon the government and the employers, the trade unions can also help their sick by means of collective dealings with private hospitals for their care. Inasmuch as about one-third of the total hospital facilities of the United States are privately owned and because, furthermore, many sick workers do not like to go to public institutions, it becomes both possible and necessary for the trade unions to deal with the private hospitals on an organized basis. This will insure better care and more reasonable rates. Such organized dealing with private hospitals is often practiced in European countries and is especially important in American localities where public hospital facilities are either very poor or non-existent. In many cases a committee of the local central body could arrange conveniently for the hospital needs of trade unionists and their families generally in the community.

### HEALTH INSTITUTIONS OPERATED BY THE UNIONS

In addition to the measures indicated above—relating to the government, the employers and private medical institutions—the trade unions can do much to relieve the burden of sickness on their members by organizing medical enterprises of their own. This, in fact, they have been doing to some extent ever since the beginnings of the trade union movement. Their union health institutions have ranged from local sick committees to visit ill members, elementary systems of sick and death benefits, and such ambitious health projects as the health center and rest home of the I.L.G.W.U. and the tuberculosis sanitarium of the Typographical Union. The Detroit clinic of the United Automobile Workers was also, until arbitrarily closed by Homer Martin, a fine example of a union health project. Such health institutions have served greatly to stabilize the respective unions.

Now, as part of the present wide-

spread agitation for a better people's health, many unions are displaying renewed tendencies to embark upon health insurance and other medical enterprises of their own. These projects vary considerably from the traditional sick and death benefits of the old craft unions in that they generally aim to provide their members directly with medical care. Such plans are now being put into effect in New York by the Transport Workers, Office Workers, Hotel and Restaurant Workers, Fur Workers, and other local unions.

It is not within the scope of this article to analyze these several New York plans, which are of various types but rather to state a few general principles that should be borne in mind by unions when setting up medical systems. The first thing is that the union should not try to solve all the sickness problems of its members and their families, not to speak of the unorganized and the unemployed. That is too big a job for it to accomplish with its own resources. The union can take care of only the most elementary and urgent medical needs. For the rest it is necessary to demand aid from the state through legislation and financial subsidies, and also from the employers through union agreements. The people's health is a broad political issue requiring action by the widest masses, not something that can be solved by the effects of individual unions.

Other key principles for unions to bear in mind are that the unions themselves must retain full control of the management of their medical plans, the physicians serving in the role of expert professionals; that health insurance and medical aid for union members constitute a complicated problem and should be embarked upon only after careful study; that the members must not be loaded up with heavy medical assessments which they cannot or will not pay; that the success of the plans depends upon furnishing the members good medical service, even if a limited one; that attempts to provide ultra-cheap medical care are dangerous; that government subsidies should be sought for union medical projects; that great advantage lies in several organizations cooperating together in health work; that good arrangements for health insurance can be made with the International Workers Order; that the unions should carry on an active educational campaign regarding the occupational diseases of their respective industries.

Union medical plans, properly organized, can be of much service not only to sick members but also as stabilizers of the unions. But to do so they must be founded upon sound principles and practice. Otherwise they will do much harm.

### ORGANIZING FOR HEALTH WORK

For the trade unions to carry on health work successfully a certain amount of special organization is necessary. Thus, the unions should formulate comprehensive health programs, generally along the foregoing lines and comprising demands upon the government and the employer institutions, and the establishment of elementary health projects by the unions themselves. To supervise the working out of the union health programs there should be actively functioning health committees in the A. F. of L. and the CIO nationally, and also in their respective national craft and industrial unions, their state and city central bodies, and their local unions.

As we have already indicated, the

trade unions should insist, as the U.M.W.A. is now doing in its present wage negotiations, upon full representation in all factory and industrial health projects. Besides this, the trade unions, entering boldly into the broad health movement, should participate in the innumerable local and national movements dealing with questions of public health and demand adequate representation in the various health conferences, boards, community chests, and the like.

The question of protecting the people's health is an urgent political issue in which many sections of the population are actively interested. It provides a basis, therefore, for cooperative action between trade unions, farmers' organizations, youth movements, Negro organizations, women's clubs, progressive doctors' groups, and many other bodies in joint support of their common health needs and demands. Properly developed, the question of the people's health can become a very powerful means for helping build the democratic front. It is a key plank in the general program of the progressive forces; an elementary human issue which is difficult for reactionaries to fight against.

It is along such lines as the foregoing that the trade unions can function effectively in health work, give maximum protection to the men, women and children of the whole working class who are caught in the grip of the grim terror—sickness, and strengthen themselves in so doing.



## Anti-Hague Forces Unite In Bayonne Poll Rally

(Special to the Daily Worker)

**BAYONNE, May 5.**—A united labor movement will borrow a page from the past tonight, when with bands playing, banners waving and torchlights lighting up the way, its members and followers will march through the streets in support of the Home Rule vs. Hague Rule slate in the coming municipal elections on Tuesday, May 9.

The procession, arranged under the auspices of the Labor Party League and the United Industrial Workers, will terminate with a giant rally at the baseball field at 27th St. and Ave. C. G. Warren Morgan, head of the Hudson County Newspaper Guild, is chairman of the committee in charge of the event.

Indications are that the rally, to be addressed by the Home Rule candidates and representatives from the CIO, the A. F. of L., and Independent Unions, will attract a huge throng. A similar rally, held indoors last Friday, brought out the S. R. O. sign and hundreds were turned away.

### HAGUE FORCES DESPERATE

With but four days left in the campaign, the activity of the contestant slates has reached feverish heights and the election is the main topic of conversation amongst a thoroughly aroused electorate. Forums and mass meetings are being held daily throughout the city. The local chapter of the American Youth Congress has arranged a public forum at which time the

respective candidates will speak on "What My Ticket Offers the Youth of Bayonne."

Meanwhile the Hague forces, sensing the determination of the people to end their boss' domination of this city, have, through their stooge "Citizens League," begun a campaign of slander and vilification against the Home Rule candidates.

The local press has been engaged to create the impression that Hagueism is not an issue and to concentrate their fire on the Home Rule ticket. Telegrams have been dispatched to business and professional people warning them of a mysterious "chaos and bankruptcy" facing the city in the advent of a Home Rule victory.

Additional evidence that the Hague forces are using all means—fair or foul—to perpetuate themselves in office was revealed with the announcement of the registered voters, 43,348 people out of a total population of 90,000 have "registered." Home Rule supporters pointed out that so large a registration in a city of this size could only mean that thousands are illegally registered.

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