

Organizing to Fight the Steel Trust

By Arne Swabeck

SIX years ago a whole continent was stirred by the great events of the steel strike. For the first time since the advent of steel it became possible to move four international unions, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, in a united campaign of organization of the workers in the industry under the able leadership of Wm. Z. Foster.

Today all of these unions, except one, have disappeared from the mills without leaving a trade behind them.

This one exception, the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers, is but a shadow of its former strength; crippled to a point where it performs none of the functions of a union and existing only in smaller independent plants.

No reflection of its glorious past can be found in the

present policies of this union, nor any of the traditions of its militant predecessors. It has a miserably small membership; counting on December 31, 1924, only 11,505 dues-paying members, while the steel industry employs almost one half million workers. The official policy as pursued by the Amalgamated Association makes no pretense whatever of militancy towards the bosses, it makes no effort to organize the unorganized mills or even get near the mill gates of the big corporation plants; it has nothing but scorn for the thousands of unskilled workers in the industry. Several strikes called by the Association and now running into the fourth year receive no further attention but the payment of some paltry benefits. The international officials hold down their salaries and parade their own stupidity; their highest aspiration seems to be to maintain the sanctity of contracts entered into with the



A GROUP OF STEEL WORKERS

rapacious steel manufacturers, who yet tolerate the union but don't give a snap for agreements. The contract is a "bond of honor to be kept inviolate" is the repeated expression of "old grandmother" Tighe, the president of the Association.

Early Militant Unionism.

Long before the iron-puddling furnaces had become generally supplanted by open hearth and bessemer steel furnaces, the iron workers became conscious of the need of unionism. In 1858 the first union appeared in the industry—the Sons of Vulcan, composed of iron puddlers. It remained secret until 1862. In 1861 the Associated Brotherhood of Iron, Steel, Bar Plate and Guide Mill Heaters was organized and in 1864 the Iron and Steel Roll Hands of the United States. Some jurisdictional overlapping occurred between these unions until in 1875 they succeeded in bringing about the present Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers. However, a struggle for control, mainly between puddlers and finishers set in and several secessions took place, but the seceding unions were comparatively short lived.

Between 1880 and 1890 practically all the iron mills in the Pittsburgh district were unionized, at least as far as the skilled workers were concerned. In 1891 the Amalgamated Association reached its pinnacle as a factor in the industry, counting 24,068 members and wielding great power. At the Homestead mills before the strike of 1892, shop committees organized by the union were functioning effectively, in fact had complete control of working conditions. They did not permit the bosses to hire and fire men at will. They secured advantages for the workers. The militancy of the Association of that time has been splendidly attested to by the subsequent events of that memorable strike. When the employers finally, after this bitter contest, emerged supreme, the union disappeared from Homestead to be brought to life again, in 1901, as a secret organization numbering about 1,000 members, but it was no more secret when one day several hundred members were fired from the mill and the organization busted.

Since its heyday before the Homestead strike the Amal-

gamated Association has witnessed a rapid decline both in numbers and in strength. During its more recent history strong progressive groupings have developed from within the union aiming at infusing it with a more militant spirit and a better fighting leadership. In 1911 a left-wing movement developed, composed mainly of Socialist and I. W. W. elements, who, however, accepted the policy of staying within the union. This group came almost to a point of controlling the 1912 convention held in Chicago and it put through the initiative and referendum, but shortly thereafter disintegrated and withered away.

Blocking the Great Steel Strike.

During the 1919 organization drive the Amalgamated Association, with the present administration headed by Mike F. Tighe in control, became one of the principal factors; but this administration also became one of the biggest stumbling blocks in the way of success. Although in the words of Mike Tighe, testifying before the senatorial committee of investigation, the secretary of the Association issued 150,000 dues cards during that period, this golden opportunity for expansion was completely neglected. More than that, while the rank and file members gave wholehearted co-operation the international officials deliberately sabotaged every active organization step taken and even tried to make the union desert the movement. In the midst of this organization drive, participated in jointly by 24 different organizations, the Amalgamated convention, under the leadership of Mike Tighe made a bid for separate consideration by the United States Steel Corporation in a letter addressed to Judge Gary.

Catering to all the intense capitalist hatred of "disturbing elements" and appealing on the basis of patriotic duty that the judge use his efforts to "stem the tide of unrest," the letter proposed that a separate conference be arranged between the corporation and the Amalgamated Association. In replying Judge Gary showed his scorn for the unions. Refusing to engage in any kind of a conference he stated that his corporation was rendering efficient patriotic service by maintaining the "open shop." Later the same officials repeated the treasonable performance and attempted to enter into a separate agreement with the Bethlehem company, which was also refused.

More than once after the historic September 22, 1919, when the great steel strike was called, did the Amalgamated officials demonstrate their slavish servility to the bosses and their readiness to betray this young, splendid movement. While the strikers, numbering hundreds of thousands, were engaged in this most bitter struggle, when they were facing cossack terrorism and the tyranny of the steel towns, Mike Tighe and his helpers deliberately thrust a knife into their backs.

The Amalgamated Association had previously obtained contracts with certain mills covering only the skilled tonnage workers. Thousands of unskilled workers meanwhile joined the union and when all were swept along in the strike movement the Amalgamated officials ordered the workers in these mills back to work in the name of sanctity of contract with the employers. An outright violation of the principle of labor solidarity which was looked upon as such by the other unions! It seriously crippled the strike. Tighe even revoked

charters of local lodges in Cleveland, Ohio, which refused to obey his traitorous ruling. While the mighty steel trust, with all the terrible weapons at its disposal and the active support of the government and its crawling officials, could not stem the tide of revolt and could not quench the spirit of the workers these servile tools of capitalism led by Mike Tighe succeeded in driving the first dangerous wedge into their ranks. They must now take their share of responsibility for the final defeat and for the grievous conditions still prevailing in the steel mills.

Reaction Becomes Further Entrenched.

The big steel corporations have built up a terrific reputation as union-crushers. They have again and again succeeded in vindicating this reputation. Other obstacles, however, have grown with the expansion of the industry and its development of technic and specialization; obstacles of the kind which the unions interested have not yet learned to overcome. The highly centralized stage of ownership, control, policy and organization of the industry makes and approach toward unionization on a craft basis impossible. The interests of the multitudes of specialized crafts with almost as many different scales of wages and working conditions will appear conflicting as long as unions exist on a craft basis, and can only be properly taken care of by a union operating on a complete industrial basis, departmentalized according to the needs of the industry. At two successive conventions, in 1923 at Warren, Ohio, and 1924 at Pittsburgh, Pa., the industrial form of organization was endorsed but nothing has been done to carry the endorsement into effect. The Amalgamated Association is stubbornly maintaining its craft outlook; a policy actively stimulated by all the conservative officials. In fact so narrow is the outlook that interest is taken only in the tonnage men—the skilled iron and steel trades—little attention being paid to other skilled workers within the mill gates and absolutely none to the unskilled. Yet the latter compose the overwhelming army of the most ruthlessly exploited industrial slaves in America,

whose ranks are constantly increasing with the advancement of the machine.

Before the Homestead strike in 1892, the shop committees organized by the union initiated efforts to get some benefit for the workers out of any newly established machinery increasing the output. Today it has almost become an accepted policy by the leadership of the Amalgamated Association that only the corporations are entitled to such benefits. It is ever ready to acquiesce in any demand for reduction of wages because of eliminations of certain turns by the new machines or in having the members thrown on the streets because of elimination of a certain amount of labor power. Instead of courageously facing the real problems of the workers in the industry, attempting to work out some kind of a solution, this spineless leadership has plunged headlong into the methods of "class collaboration" confirming its own bankruptcy by giving way to whatever the steel manufacturers see fit to demand.

Progressive Movement Revived.

The rapid decline suffered by the union since the great organization drive, the heavy loss of membership, the disastrous effects of the reactionary policies pursued and growing collaboration of officials with the manufacturers coupled with the increasing pressure of exploitation, even amongst the better paid members of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers, gave rise to a new progressive movement.

About two years ago it started on a local scale, calling itself the I. D. K. D. Y. Club. These initials signifying, "I Don't Know, Do You?" It was the first attempt to question the policies of the administration and it became a rather fitting name as the movement in its first stage had no clearly defined aim. But soon it assumed the form of a conscious opposition to the official policies and to the administration in general. It linked itself up loosely on a national scale, endeavored to establish connections with the lodges and prepared to give battle for its ideas. This movement received

generous support from some of the more substantial lodges and it grew rapidly.

The Convention "Red" Scare.

At the last annual convention, which convened at Pittsburgh, Pa., on April 7th, the progressive movement mobilized considerable strength. Almost half of the delegates generally followed the progressives' lead. It struck terror into the hearts of Mike Tighe and his supporters who repeated their desperate cry of the union elections the year before—"The reds are getting after us." They launched into acrimonious attacks upon the progressive opposition in which they were actively assisted by the invited spellbinders "representing both labor and capital." Day by day for more than two weeks the little red herring was dragged across the trail. The progressives fought back, showing that only such lodges in which the militants were active had a spark of life left. But by failing to present a definite program of aims and objects, upon which they might unite all their supporters into a solid block and gain new adherents, they made a cardinal mistake.

The official reports made of the past year's administration policies and achievements, despite the volumes of words and figures, represented a complete confession of bankruptcy. Yet the progressives were not able to rise to the occasion and their criticism became purely negative. They had no clearly defined policies, a situation which was cleverly utilized by the officials. And thus the convention with its seething discontent still confined itself exclusively to trade issues, and particularly to sectional issues, of wage scales of the various crafts. A criminal waste of effort when it is considered that the Amalgamated Association has no power to enforce any wage scale the basis of which is always set by the larger unorganized mills. One proposal made by the progressives to abolish the one per cent strike assessment and in its place levy an increase on dues payments was adopted after a hot contest. One proposal sponsored by the administration providing for a stricter censorship on material submitted to the official journal was defeated.

Although the progressives since their inception have fought the corrupt officialdom at every step they have failed signally in laying the solid foundation required to build a left-wing movement and to establish leadership. Their task should be to raise the general issues affecting the rank and file as a whole and to bring before them, and before the convention, the needs of the Association and of the workers in the industry formulated into a practical concrete program, this program to be expressed in definite measures to organize the industry—measures to establish a system of shop committees as a basis of the union and composed of both organized and unorganized—measures necessary for a functioning departmentalized industrial union as well as stating in unmistakable terms the political issues confronting the working class. Recognition of the class struggle and adoption of class policies. Need of independent political action by the workers through a labor party and need of trade union unity.

The lack of clearly defined aims has since reacted heavily upon the progressive movement and should serve as a real lesson of which benefits can be drawn for future activities. A few months ago an election was held in the Amalgamated Association to fill the vacancy caused by the death of the vice-president for the sheet and tin division. J. Mc-

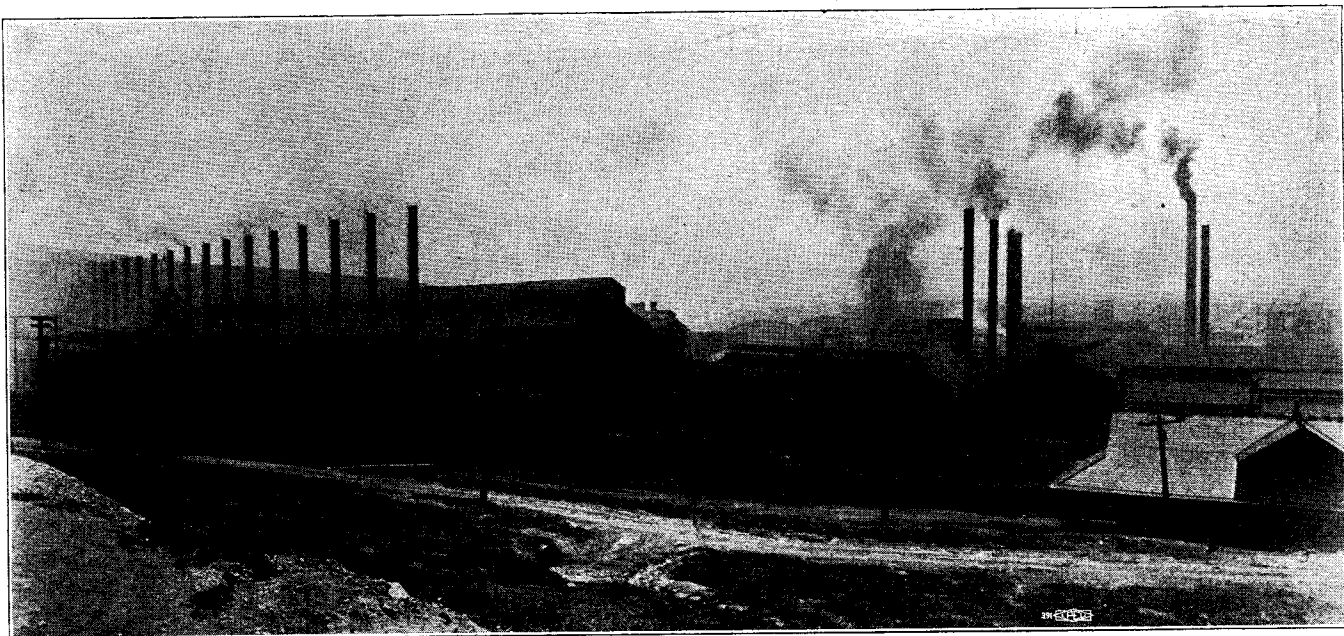
Keown became the standard bearer of the progressives, and Larner the choice of the administration force. The latter carried the election with 2,307 votes against 1,070 cast for McKeown. At the preceding general election the administration slate just got through by the skin of their teeth and while a superficial view may lead to the belief that the verdict of the membership had now changed in favor of the old bureaucrats there is nothing to indicate that such is the case. It must rather be assumed that the complete absence of a program made both sides seem almost alike to the rank and file, thus destroying the hopes formerly pinned to the progressive cause.

Communists Present Solution.

The organization of the steel workers still remains a task to be accomplished the need of which is as pressing as ever. But it is a herculean task requiring unstinted courage and militancy. In the steel trust is bound up all the powers of the capitalist system itself. It will not give up its terrific grip on the hundreds of thousands of unorganized slaves without a desperate struggle. No results can be expected from the fossilized methods pursued by the present trade-union officialdom. Their personal interests are too bound up with the capitalist system to permit them to strike the bold blow that alone can bring results. Only the Communists can master this gigantic task.

Although the match today may appear fearfully uneven, the Communists toiling inside the mill gates are serenely preparing their first steps toward giving expression to the needs of the workers and formulating the measures which will lead to the hammering out of a complete strategy of organization. In the most elementary and practical terms possible these measures are being proposed within the union to bring new life and new hope into an almost devitalized aggregation and to give new leadership. It should soon become a more solid rallying point for the progressive elements. Simultaneously the first bond is being established with the unorganized. The Communists are conscious of the requirements to secure a mass basis for a powerful movement. Ultimate success is foretold by the fear exhibited by the spineless union bureaucrats and by all the pliant tools of the steel trust. It is assured by the iron march of the world proletariat.

Anti-Imperialist Protest



CARNEGIE MILLS, BRADDOCK, PA.