PROBLEMS OF ILLINOIS LABOR

LEADERS OF STATE LABOR MOVEMENT CONTINUE TO THE RIGHT AT HIGH SPEED

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ARTICLE ONE.

TO what degree has labor shared in the "prosperity" of the last few years and what has its leadership done to take advantage of the favorable situation presented?

These are two very pertinent questions to the workers and as far as the state of Illinois is concerned, presents an interesting picture containing valuable lessons for those willing to learn.

While the leadership of organized labor should be the first to sum up the experiences of the movement and draw the proper conclusions, the various labor gatherings held during these years show an almost persistent evasion of labor's vital problems. The last Illinois State Federation of Labor convention was no exception. It was not only more reactionary than its predecessors, but made no attempts whatever to deal with the actual needs of labor.

The losses suffered in membership, in working conditions, and in organizational positions, particularly in the basic industries, during this "prosperity" period have caused no comment from the labor leadership; not to speak of the failures to bring forward any aggressive measures to change the tide.

Survey of Conditions.

WHAT are the conditions of labor in the various industries within the state of Illinois? A brief survey without giving detailed statistics will give sufficient food for thought.

The building trades workers are undoubtedly those who have been most favored by the "prosperity" period and its tremendous building boom. Their unions have gained in membership and they have gained wage increases in rapid succession. The open-shop forces, as particularly represented by the Chicago "citizens' committee," have been temporarily defeated. This may be said, however, to be mainly due to the great demand for skilled building mechanics created by the boom, and also due to the conditions of the industry which despite the centralization of capital yet leaves room for craft unions to function and to deliver the goods for their members. Nevertheless, the building corporations and bankers are merely biding their time waiting for the slack season to renew the attack. The building trades unions, meanwhile, have failed to exert the necessary effort to establish union shop conditions and to unify their ranks. Unless the necessary measures are taken, they will be in no stronger position organizationally than before the boom.

The printing trades, the clothing workers, and various other organized miscellaneous trades have been able to hold their own and in some degree strengthen their positions.

Transportation Workers.

THE workers in the transportation industry, a very important section of the labor movement in Illinois, have gained some almost invisible wage increases, but, of course, become subject to the provisions of the Watson-Parker bill with its abolishment of strikes and the established anti-labor board of mediation. The shop crafts on the other hand have been almost completely shot to pieces since the 1922 strike. They have suffered wage decreases and the remnants of their unions more or less become subject to the B. & O. plan making the workers more effective objects of exploitation.

The workers in the food industry, taking in the big packing house plants at Chicago and East St. Louis, have lost practically every vestige of organization. The union once existing, embracing all the workers, has collapsed. The company unions now rule supreme in Chicago plants. These company unions were installed to engineer wage cuts and have done so successfully. The company union in the Armour plant recently suggested the restoration of the 12- and 14-hour workday. At present the plant operates on the 10-hour basis, the average wage being $27 a week for male workers. During the last few weeks, a new method has been inaugurated of eliminating all older workers who may have any claims on the so-called compensation institutions of the company, while a new schedule of further wage cutting is starting.

In the Metal Industry.

IN the metal industry, a few of the more skilled crafts have been able to maintain a degree of organization, however, with loss of many members. Some of them have gained small wage increases; but for the big bulk of the workers in the many great manufacturing plants, organization does not exist save for the company unions operating against the workers. For them "prosperity" has meant wage cuts in various forms, particularly in piece work rates. While these are some of the most exploited workers it makes the situation no better to note that in the steel mills of Madison and Granite City, Ill., laborers belonging to the steel workers' union receive only 37 cents an hour.

Many Illinois coal mines have suspended operation for long intervals, some permanently, due to the advance of the open-shop coal mining with no efforts to organize the unorganized territory. As for the union itself, its leadership has become so infested with graft and corruption that there is great danger of its complete paralysis. The sell-out of Farrington to the Peabody Coal Company is by no means accidental. The coal operators are as actively as possible pushing open-shop conditions. If a coal miner leaves his underground job a few minutes ahead of time, an investigation is made and if it is found he could do other work, he is fired. It has become an almost established system, that coal miners are always cheated on weight with the union doing little or nothing to redress the grievances of the miners.

Lately, however, a revival of the progressive movement is taking place within the union, starting thruout the state and bringing some real rays of hope for more militancy in the future. There are, of course, signs of similar activities within the unions in other industries. Some having already brought results in a measure by increasing the ranks of the individual unions and bringing a new and better spirit to the rank and file workers, but that is entirely due to the activities of progressive elements.

(Continued tomorrow.)