

The "National Miners' Union" A New Conception of Unionism

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It can truly be said that the *National Miners' Union* was baptized in the fire of the class struggle. Born in the citadel of the most ruthless union-smashing employers—Pittsburgh—the casualty list on the first day of the convention showed six delegates in the hospital, one seriously injured, many more with broken heads and over 125 in jail. This was the result of a combined attack of paid thugs of the Lewis' bureaucracy and the Pittsburgh police. Among the former were also plenty of broken heads but no arrests. Nevertheless these attacks were repelled and the convention proceeded in another hall, thus completing its main business under the most trying difficulties.

The launching of the *National Miners' Union* marks a historical milestone for the American working class. A beginning, not only of new unions of the unorganized masses, but of an entirely new conception of unionism with a new type of union leadership.

In its declaration of policy, adopted at the convention, the new union definitely rejects class collaboration and goes on record for militant struggle against the employers. It declares itself in categorical opposition to the capitalist parties and in favor of independent working-class political action. It pledges its support to the workers' struggles in other industries and for the organization of the unorganized masses into militant unions. It extends the hand of class solidarity to the workers of the world in the struggle for emancipation from capitalist exploitation. It is a labor union built on unequivocal recognition of the class struggle and as an instrument of the workers in that struggle.

CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH THE UNION GREW

The character of the *National Miners' Union* was predetermined by the conditions under which it came into existence. *It is a product of a period leading toward more sharpened struggles.* It is a result of the increased imperialist pressure upon the workers which has been particularly felt in the mining industry. There the industrial depression has become deep going and the rationalization crisis

acute. It was made inevitable by the innumerable criminal betrayals by the whole Lewis bureaucracy. The new miners' union is the culmination of the militant, tenacious resistance of the coal miners to the attacks of the operators and their labor lieutenants.

During the post-war period unemployment has shown steady growth in the mine fields, caused mainly by closing of the additional mines developed for the war demand and by the substitution of other fuels. Later the introduction and rapid extension of machine mining swiftly made a permanent phenomenon of the constantly growing army of unemployed coal miners. Loading machines have been installed which in some record cases increase the output per man to almost 500 per cent. One of these monsters installed in a Southern Illinois mine, operated by nine men, holds a record of loading 425 tons in eight hours.

The union officials failed entirely to do anything whatever to protect the interests of the men as the loading machine and other mechanical devices advanced, displacing labor, completely destroying the once existing working conditions and the existing tonnage rate. The number of unemployed coal miners today probably exceeds 300,000. Misery and want stalk the coal fields.

FIGHTING THE TRAITORS

Adding insult to injury came the countless betrayals of the Lewis' bureaucracy at the head of the U. M. W. of A. These atrocious crimes were perpetrated in the face of and in collusion with the operators' onslaught upon the union. The betrayals of the past are well known. The most recent ones are of the most far-reaching consequence. In abandoning the Jacksonville scale the Pennsylvania and Ohio strike was lost and the union in both of these districts finally and definitely destroyed.

In Illinois, the last stronghold of the U. M. W. of A., the subsequent agreement signed reduced that union completely to a company union with a 20 per cent wage cut against which the Illinois miners are now in open revolt. In the unorganized territory of the Fayette County, Pa., coke region, 40,000 miners received an 11 per cent wage cut. In district after district the union has been sold out and annihilated. In some of the thus established unorganized territories wages went as low as \$3.20 per day.

All these factors, from their very inception, had a distinct radicalizing effect upon the broad masses of the coal miners. The left wing swiftly gained immense following and was able to build the most dynamic opposition movement witnessed in recent labor history. Both from the so-called organized and from the unorganized fields

the rank and file coal miners rallied to its support. The movement crystallized rapidly through the April 1st "Save-the-Union" Conference. Its militant struggle to broaden and extend the Pennsylvania and Ohio strikes and to oust the traitors aroused a mighty sentiment. With its further program of a shorter workday, fight for a national agreement, for organization of the unorganized fields and for militant policies the left-wing movement went on until the U. M. W. of A. became so far exterminated that there was no other course open than the building of a new union.

REAL STRUGGLE NOW BEGINNING

The foundation for this new union has now been laid at the Pittsburgh Convention. However, the clash of policies between the left-wing opposition and the right-wing bureaucracy, formerly within the old union, will continue in various forms. There will still be clashes between the same forces but they will be part of the general struggle to build the new union. The operators still determined to wipe out all semblance of unionism and establish "open shop" conditions will certainly use the Lewis machine and their company union in every way possible to prevent the building of the new militant union.

The government, pursuing the imperialist aims of Wall Street, has been in the past, in every mine locality, an active third force in joint collaboration with the others opposing the new union movement. It will in the future maintain that role. Where, in the past, the courts, the police and national guard have been mobilized against the militant strike activities of the left wing and against extension of the Pennsylvania and Ohio strikes, they will in the future, jointly with the operators and with the remnants of the Lewis' machine, desperately oppose the building of the *National Miners' Union*.

GREAT TASKS AHEAD

The obstacles in the way of the full and complete development of this working-class union are thus very great. The forces opposing it are formidable. Yet the objective conditions are now and will become increasingly favorable for its development. The miners in the unorganized fields are eager for organization. The continued existence of the company union of John L. Lewis can be maintained only by further sell-outs to the operators. This company union can hold out no hope for the miners. That the operators will continue the attacks to further reduce the present low standard of wages and increase their own profits is quite inevitable; but this

additional pressure will serve first of all to further solidify the ranks of the miners and make the new union more essential. The militant tradition of the coal miners; their understanding of and deep devotion to the cause of a fighting organization is a good guarantee for future success.

Immense are also the tasks of the *National Miners' Union*. First, to make the complete change away from surrender, away from class collaboration toward class struggle. Secondly, to organize all the coal fields, and restore the nationally fighting unit. To organize all the Negro miners and draw them into full participation and co-leadership of the union. Thirdly, to restore union conditions, to enforce regulations to protect the miners in the operation of loading machines and mechanical devices, as well as making an extensive fight to secure relief for the many thousands of unemployed in the industry. Fourthly, to become a real factor in assisting the workers everywhere in their struggles and to help organize new unions in the unorganized industries.

These are but some tasks enumerated, the solution of which will help inaugurate a new era for the American working class in which it can face the real enemy more conscious of its true destiny. In its convention declarations the *National Miners' Union* made perfectly clear that no matter how great the difficulties, it will bend all efforts to begin its work in earnest.

ROLE OF OUR PARTY

It is no longer disputed that our Party plays a very definite role in working-class movements of this character. Many efforts have already been made by reactionaries to give the *National Miners' Union* a communist label, hoping on that basis to frighten the rank and file away. In this they have been unsuccessful. First, because the movement for the new union made clear long ago that it would be an organization of coal miners, embracing all workers employed in and around the mines, excluding bosses. Secondly, because communism or the active participation of communists can no longer be used to frighten these workers. Our Party has participated very actively indeed in guiding the policies as well as doing the hard Jimmy Higgins' work to build the movement through the functioning of our members within the organization. Members of the Communist Party in every working-class organization and movement carry out the policies of the Party. And so here, in this respect, the Workers (Communist) Party has fulfilled its historical role. The continuation of that is, of course, the best guarantee for the future success of the Union.

This is the first concrete proof of our new orientation toward the building of new unions of the unorganized masses of workers. The new *National Miners' Union* has nothing in common with the theory or practice of dual unionism. It is forming in an industry where the old union is either extinct or existing through the policies of its reactionary leadership, as a company union. It is new not only in organization but also in conception. Distinct from the old type of moribund craft union being turned into instruments of class collaboration; distinct in that the new union accepts the principle of the class struggle as its basis.

Other new unions of this type will follow. Such are already in the making in the textile industry, and within the needle trades. Wherever the old type of existing unions has become an obstacle to the organization of the masses of workers in the industry, new unions will be built over the heads of these obstacles. In the industries entirely unorganized, as well, new unions must be built as class organs of the workers. This is the further task of our Party.

SOME IMPORTANT LESSONS

The movement for the building of the new miners' union, while still very young, already holds a number of important lessons for our Party.

We have not succeeded in making sufficiently clear to the miners the Party's role in this movement, nor have we won the full organizational benefits for our Party. In future struggles, we must learn to keep constantly in mind at every phase of the struggle the problem of recruiting new members into the Party. It strengthens both the particular struggle we are engaged in and the work of the Party as a whole. We must also learn better how to assimilate new recruits into the Party and keep new units functioning actively. Special efforts must be made in this direction in connection with those recruited during the miners' struggle.

In future mass struggles, we must learn to organize our relief machinery at the very beginning of the struggle, without waiting until the problem of relief becomes a pressing one. The miners' struggle has also taught us the value and necessity of drawing up perspectives for as long a period as possible, and checking and revising them at every stage of the struggle.

Different sections of the miners awoke at different periods to the nature of the struggle in which they were engaged. The Party experienced many difficulties as a result and the movement manifested many organizational and political weaknesses for this reason.

These, however, are undoubtedly being overcome as the movement becomes more homogeneous and the various sections accumulate experiences which clarify their understanding of the nature of the conflict. Despite all shortcomings, and what is more important, despite the many enormous obstacles, this movement has already made history, and holds real hope for the future.

To our Party, the *National Miners' Union* should mean real aid in the class struggle. It should be of importance to our general campaigns. The movement has already been so in the past—for example, in facilitating the entering of communist candidates on the ballot in several mining states. It must become a source of strength to our Party; for only by actively building our Party can the successful building of new unions be accomplished.

