

The New York Dress Strike

by Ben Gitlow

Now the story can be told. The New York dressmakers strike called on February 17 by the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union is practically over. We can now soberly review the strike and draw the necessary lessons for the working class. We can determine how the trade union policy of the Communist Party and the T.U.U.I. works out in fact.

The Party leadership hailed the strike as an historic event of the greatest importance to the working class. They claimed that it would inspire other sections of the working class to struggle. The outstanding feature of the dressmakers strike, however, was its failure to inspire the needle trades workers to struggle. Even the Party members were not enthused and failed to respond with the militancy and heroism that marked the former struggles of the needle workers led by the left wing and the Communists.

The advocates of the new leftist line in the trade unions promised a mountain but produced a mole-hill. The very logic of the wrong trade union policies was the shameful mess that was made of the dress strike. If reactionaries had conducted a strike like the leaders of the TUUL and the N.T.W.I.U. conducted the dress strike they would have been denounced and held up to the scorn of the workers.

A Few Preliminary Facts

It is necessary therefore to note a few facts before an estimate of the whole situation is made.

Fact Number 1: On October 7, 1930 the Shop Delegates Council adopted the original demands for the strike. The *Daily Worker* of Oct. 8 reports this as follows:

"The demands proposed by the Executive of the Shop Delegates Council were adopted unanimously except for the six votes of the Lovestonites. The principal demands are for minimum wage scales in the various crafts, week work, 5-day week and 7-hour day, no speed-up and unemployment insurance."

Adam's rib was turned into a woman and Eve was born to tempt and torment him. Now the *Daily Worker* performs so-called Communist miracles, by making "unanimous" a proposition against which six votes were registered.

The six votes registered against the recommendation of demands for the dress strike were recorded because the demands were not based upon actual situation in the industry. They could not serve to mobilize the workers and were therefore unrealistic and adventurist demands. The basis for opposition to these demands were to the General Executive Board of very clearly stated in the letter sent the union at its sessions of December 25-28 by Chas. S. Zimmerman, L. Nelson and I. Stenzor, on behalf of the Needle Trades Workers Unity League. Briefly they were the following:

1. The demands will not lead the best possible mobilization of the workers. The demands for week work and the 35-hour week, while they would be valuable acquisitions, cannot be put forward as practical immediate demands when the dressmakers are working on the average fifty hours a week and when they are of the opinion these demands are unattainable at the present time. Therefore we propose the demands which are popular with the workers and attainable at the present time, that is, the 40-hour, 5-day week, guaranteed minimum wage scales, no discharge, unemployment insurance fund, etc. . .

2. That the N.T.W.I.U. invite the New York Joint Board of the Dressmakers of the I.L.G.W.U. to a conference for the purpose of establishing a united front of all dressmakers against the bosses.

3. That the N.T.W.I.U. change its policy towards the right wing unions and take steps to build up left wing movements in these unions.

4. That a fight be made for trade union unity in the needle trades, and that the organization of left wings develop a struggle for uniting the needle trades workers in one industrial union.

5. That the unorganized be organized—branding as a fundamental mistake the giving up of organization drives by the N.T.W.I.U.

6. That union democracy be restored. That the General Executive Board go on record publicly against the expulsion policy in the union and in the T.U.U.I. and against practices of discrimination or persecution against workers for varying opinions.

The General Executive Board rejected this appeal. The original demands were given the O.K. of the G.E.B. and plans were worked out for the mobilization of the workers on the basis of the adopted demands. At the meeting of the G.E.B., W. Z. Foster was present as Secretary of the T.U.U.I. and leader of the Communist Party. The demands therefore received the official endorsement and approval of the T.U.U.I. and the Communist Party leadership. Those who resisted the adventurist ruinous proposals were called "right wing," "company union" agents and "strike-breakers", tho it was a well-known secret that many of the most prominent and influential members of the G.E.B. opposed the demands and would have spoken and resisted their adoption if it were not for the fact that the present Party regime is based upon a demand for blind submission and mechanical execution of all decisions. To fight for one's con-

victions, for one's viewpoint in opposition to the accepted and handed-down decisions of the Party bureaucracy is to commit "Communist" heresy and to suffer damnation and humiliation as a "right winger."

Facts and Fancies

The advocates of the new trade union policies however soon found out that it is one thing to draw up a set of demands on paper but quite a different thing to carry it out in life and action. On paper it is easy to parade as an extreme left winger and a revolutionist. But to lead the workers in struggle is a different story. The masses cannot be led by phrases and pretty words. Try as much as they could the leaders of the Party the TUUL and the union could not inspire the workers with enthusiasm and a readiness for struggle with the demands. The conditions in the industry were bad enough. Speed-up long hours, unemployment, low wages, prevailed. The workers were dissatisfied. They, however, were not responsive. Not even the Communist Party members were enthusiastic over the prospect of the coming strike. The Communist Party fraction refused to accept any positions of responsibility for the strike tho they did not dare to speak against or oppose the demands.

A Right-About Face

The present Communist Party regime is responsible for an inner Party situation that prevents free open discussion within the Party. The fact that Party members fear to express their opinions is of the most dangerous consequences to a Communist party. In the needle trades the Party leadership from October 8 till February, the eve of the strike, had no way of determining the attitude of the masses towards its proposals. Faced with a complete debacle they made a complete right-about turn and changed their original demands, accepting some of the proposals recommended by those who had been branded as "right-wing agents" and "scabs" just the day previous. *The proposals, however for the united front and trade union unity, for building the left wing in the right wing unions and for union democracy and unity of all the forces for the strike, were not included in the changes made.* The belated change in the demands saved the union from a complete debacle; that is the best that can be said for the change.

The revised demands were as follows:

"1. Recognition of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union, price committee and shop chairman.

"2. Guaranteed minimum wage scales on the basis of which piece work prices shall be settled—operators, \$44; pressers, \$50; cutters, \$50 (week work); drapers, \$32 (week work); finishers, \$28; examiners, \$28 (week work) floor girls (pinkers and cleaners); \$20 (week work).

"3. Immediate 20 per cent increase for all underpaid workers in every section of the city, and additional gradual increases until the union scale is reached.

"4. The 40-hour, 5-day week.

"5. Abolition of all discrimination and the right of Negro workers to every shop and every craft on the basis of equal pay for equal work.

"6. The right to the job—no discharge; equal division of work.

"7. Unemployment insurance."

The leadership refused to carry out any unity proposal to the workers in the right wing unions. At the same time they pursued a policy of the rankest discrimination. Tried and capable needle trades militants, who had always been in the forefront of the needle trades workers struggle, were excluded from all strike committees, because in their disagreements with the leadership of the Communist Party and the TUUL they insisted upon a policy of unity and not division in the ranks of the working class. The very militants who, in October, had realized the situation in the dress industry for what it actually was and introduced the correct set of demands, were eliminated from all active leadership of the strike. This discrimination was not a blow against these comrades but against the strike and the workers.

Attitude Towards I.L.G.W.U. Shops

The Communist Party, union and the T.U.U.I. leadership, in addition to the ruinous policies already noted in their preparations for the dress strike, ignored or carried out a wrong and costly policy towards the dressmakers in the shops controlled by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and on the question of the organization of the unorganized.

No serious attempt was made to organize the unorganized. There are approximately 25,000 unorganized dress makers in New York and vicinity. The organization of these should have been the main drive of the strike.

In the I.L.G.W.U. dress shops there are approximately 10,000-15,000 workers. The united front with their union for a common struggle was rejected and instead, a policy of attempting to tear away shops was made the central main drive of the strike.

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Problems of the Negro Masses

WHICH WAY: LABOR OR CAPITAL?

by Will Herberg

The economic crisis and the tremendous growth of unemployment have given a new emphasis to a number of very serious questions of concern to the Negro worker. None of these is more pressing than the problem of coping with unemployment, for to the Negro worker unemployment is an even worse scourge than to the white worker. However incredible may be the levels to which the general unemployment figures are shooting, the percentage of unemployment among the Negroes is still higher! It is calculated that unemployment has hit the Negro worker at least twice as hard as the white worker. In the city of Pittsburgh (1), for example, a city where Negroes are but 8% of the total population, 40% of the applicants for the municipal relief fund were Negroes. In Buffalo, a survey of the National Urban League showed that "in March 1930 17.7% of the Negroes were unemployed as compared with 10.8% among the whites. In Philadelphia, in one district 29.2% of the Negroes were unemployed and 6.7% of the white." (2) With all necessary secondary modifications, it remains true that the inferior status, economically and socially, of the Negro in American society, condemns him to be "the first to be fired and the last to be hired."

It must be recognized that it is often the white worker himself who helps condemn his colored fellow-worker to this position. The A. F. of L. in practice rejects any idea of the economic equality of Negro and white workers. As a rule it refuses to organize the Negro and, in the rare cases that it does, it segregates him in jim-crow unions. Cases are notorious in which conservative labor unions have ordered strikes because a Negro worker was employed while white workers were out of a job!

By and large, the situation is the same in "normal" times as far as the relations of the Negro to industry are concerned. It is a commonplace, yet it is an aching truth, that the access of the Negro worker to industry is barred by numberless obstacles even in normal times, that he can only find a place in industry in inferior and low-standard positions, that all too frequently his entry into industry is gained thru strike-breaking and scabbery. The problem of the Negro and unemployment in this crisis is an aggravation of the more general problems of the Negro and industry in normal times.

Hounded from every side, discriminated against and spurned by those to whom he has a right to look for fraternal assistance,

the Negro worker indeed needs the clearest vision if he is to reach the goal of racial and economic emancipation, or even make substantial improvement in his conditions. Unfortunately the guidance received by the Negro working masses today is not such as to lead in this direction. It comes today from just those elements of the Negro people who, in spite of their undoubted sincerity, are unfortunately not in the position to point out the road. It comes today from the "community leaders" (the preachers, the teachers, and the politicians), from the "social workers" and journalists, from precisely those who, owing to their own class position, are themselves (including the Garveyites) thoroly and subtly influenced by the crassest prejudices of "white American capitalist civilization." (3)

What are the proposals recommended by these bourgeois leaders to the Negro workers to help them meet the problems raised by unemployment and by modern industrial conditions as such? From a general viewpoint, these proposals may be grouped under three heads: (1) "Let us use the consuming (buying) power of the Negro people to force them to hire our people!" (2) "Let us build up our own industry and commerce to make places for our workers on a plane of equality and no discrimination." (3) "Let the Negro workers collaborate with the white capitalists by offering to work at lower wages and thus force an entry into industry."

Let us examine each of these proposals in order to see their significance for the Negro worker.

1. "Using Our Consuming Power."

The triviality of the first proposal is obvious on the face of it. It is indeed possible to organize boycott actions to compel petty shopkeepers in Harlem to hire Negro clerks and it is even possible on occasion to kick up a row big enough to force a Woolworth store in Chicago to make a "promise." But what has this to do with the hundreds of thousands of Negro workers in the coal, iron, steel, oil, automobile and packing industries—in the basic industries of America? Can the Negro people use their "buying power" to refuse to buy locomotives or automobiles so as to compel the big trusts to end discrimination against the Negroes? Or shall the Negro people refuse to buy meat or coal to the same end? There is no substance to the "use our buying power" proposal: it can only be raised by those whose social vision is bounded by petty industry and petty trade, who

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by Ben Gitlow

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Headlines such as this one appeared continually in the *Daily Worker*: "Scores of I.L.G.W.U. Shops Join Walk Out." The union issued a special leaflet headed as follows: "TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE INTERNATIONAL (ILGWU) Company Union." It contained the following appeal to split away from the International: "We, dressmakers, appeal to you, sisters and brothers. Join the great army of the striking dressmakers; You are suffering just as much as we are. Let us organize into a real fighting union."

The *Daily Worker* on the day of the strike, carried the following editorial:

"So utterly rotten has the I.L.G.W. become, that in an effort to save its reputation with the workers who have every reason to want to strike, fake 'strikes' have been called, with no intention of even trying to lead the strikers to victory, and always with the end result of leaving the workers worse off than before.

"For this reason the workers, the unorganized as well as those

organized in the I.L.G.W., are rallying with the members of the fighting union, the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union, to the present strike, rank and file members of the I.L.G.W. now holding responsible posts on all strike committees and on all picket lines."

It is clear that instead of carrying out a policy on unity and organization of the unorganized, a policy of dual union warfare was made the central issue of the strike. Had there been a mighty left wing in the I.L.G.W.U., then there could have been achieved a united front of the dressmakers against the bosses. The sectarian DeLeonist policy is very strikingly brought out by the tactics used in the dress strike.

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The Monroe Doctrine was described the other day by Salvador de Madariaga as consisting of two mystical dogmas: the one, the infallibility of the President of the United States; the other, the immaculate conception of American foreign policy.

Scoptics are ministered to by the American marines who endeavor to win them to all the truth of the two dogmas.