

The New York Dress Strike

by Ben Gitlow

(Concluded from last issue)

The General Trade Union Line

When applied to the trade unions as a whole we are now able to see how ridiculous, how suicidal, the sectarian trade union line of the Party is. The statement of the C.C. published on Feb. 28 contains the following:

"The main lever by which the Communist Party organizes the basic mass of the proletariat is the trade unions. Our Party has not yet learned how to use this lever. In the United States there are 35,000,000 hired workers. Of them not more than a 1/2 million are organized in the A. F. of L. and other trade union alliances and only about 15,000 are organized in the revolutionary trade unions under the leadership of the Trade Union Unity League."

Only 15,000 claimed for all the TUUL unions and the actual memberships is even less! It is clear there can be no genuine mass revolutionary trade union movement without a powerful left wing in the A. F. of L. and other mass unions totalling 3 1/2 million members.

Our Line

Before the strike was actually called the Communist Party U. S. A. (Majority Group) formulated its position towards the same in a document issued to its membership on February 10.

This document gave full approval to the appeal of Zimmerman, Nelson and Stenzor to the G.E.B. meeting of December 25-28 and concluded as follows:

"We are not neutral on any struggle involving the workers against the bosses. We can't determine our attitude by the number of workers involved in the strike. As far as the workers are concerned, for them it will be a genuine strike. The calling of the strike makes it important for us to give it our full support and to do everything in our power to bring the strike to a successful conclusion. This means that our comrades must participate in the strike, must be active in the strike and must do everything to inspire the workers to struggle militantly for their demands against the bosses. This does not mean that during the course of the strike we give up our right to criticize the leadership whenever it acts against the interests of the striking workers. All our comrades who are dressmakers and members of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union must go out on strike, whether they may be working in union or non-union shops. If our comrades are working in non-union shops then they must do everything in their power to pull the shops down on strike 100%. We should insist in this strike that special efforts should be made to organize the unorganized workers and to pull down on strike all open dress shops! We must insist that the strike must be directed mainly to the organization of the unorganized workers in the open dress shops."

"The question therefore of our attitude to the dress shops of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union is important. We realized this when we put forward our proposals for a united front. We are opposed to such a strike strategy which will bring to the fore a war between the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union on which union has jurisdiction over the workers of a particular shop. Such strike strategy will only help to develop a war between the workers, which will serve the interests of the bosses and not the workers."

"We will fight most bitterly against every effort which will be made by the right wing officialdom of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union to take over shops of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union or open shops called out on strike by the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union. At the same time for the same reason, we will oppose all moves on the part of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union to call out on strike dress shops of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Such action is bound to develop into an inter-union struggle that will divide the workers, dissipate the strike and help the bosses."

"We call upon all members of our group to actively support the strike and to help win the strike. We must not forget that our policy is a policy for the development of unity among the workers and for a united workers class front against the bosses."

The Course of the Strike

The strike was called on February 17. The idea of a general strike was abandoned. It was called just "strike" to contrast it with the practice of right wing bureaucrats of calling stoppages. The best that could be said for the strike was that it was a very poor stoppage. The response was very poor. The Daily Worker avoided giving actual figures. Between 2 and 3,000 workers, employed and unemployed responded. Picketing was poor and ineffectual. On the second day of the strike the Daily Worker carried an appeal for the necessity of swelling picketing in order to win. Party members and close sympathizers did not respond and many, in stopping work, made no attempt to pull down other workers in order to have a possibility to return to work when given permission by the union to do so. Revolutionary phrases do not necessarily result in revolutionary action during a period of struggle. The line of the leadership sowed pessimism, defeatism, and the rankest opportunism in the ranks of the Party membership and their close sympathizers.

Then—Settlements!

Three days after the strike settlements

were being made. The Daily Worker of Feb. 12 reports:

"The settlement committee of the union started yesterday to draw up agreements with the dozens of needle trades bosses who have applied for settlements to end the strike."

On February 22 the strike was practically over. The item in the Daily Worker of February 23 proves this:

"In both cities the strike committees have begun to draw up settlements with the needle trade employers and dress makers have gone back to work after winning the following demands: Recognition of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union, an increase in wage, the 40-hour 5-day week, recognition of the shop committees, equal pay for equal work for young workers, women, and Negroes, abolition of all discrimination against Negro dressmakers and unemployment insurance."

"The Dress Contractors Protective Association in New York as well as independent shops have already signed agreements with the Industrial Union to this effect."

Note carefully that the actual agreement with the Association is not quoted only the drafts of the strike committees. The Daily Worker of February 25 gives the actual details of the strike settlements, I quote:

"The answer of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union to the contention that the present is a bad time to strike is that more than 1,000 dress makers in New York City have gone back to work with increased wages, a 40-hour 5-day week, and recognition of the shop committees and of their fighting Industrial Union—the strike has been in progress only a week."

Note here no statement of what the increase actually amounted to. No minimum wage scales worked out and no unemployment insurance fund. The Daily Worker editorial on February 17 considered the unemployment insurance demand one of the most important when it stated:

"The enthusiastic action of whole shops walking out in recent days, shows the response of the workers to the demands formulated. Not the least important of these is the demand for Unemployment Insurance, a demand for which every worker should struggle and one for which all workers are urged to demonstrate on February 25, International Fighting Day Against Unemployment."

What are the facts? Workers have all gone back on the old basis which is no conditions speed-up and long hours. Some shops have actually consented to reduction in wages and prices for piece work. The failure of the strike is bound to result in a worsening instead of an improvement of conditions.

The Daily Worker of March 6 gives added proof to the actual kind of settlements made when it reports:

"Three More Shops Join Dress Strike. 1800 Back at Higher Wages. More Than 1,800 Dressmakers Have Won Improved Conditions Since the Strike Began. These gains include 40-hour 5-day week, increases in wages, recognition of shop committees, and the Union. When it is considered that before the strike these 1,800 dressmakers worked 60-70 hours a week for starvation wages, the gains of the strike so far are obvious."

Shops were settled on an individual basis. No definite understanding on terms! Some shops were settled by the settlement committee, others by the shop committees so that "special conditions" could be granted to the bosses. There was complete demoralization. Workers with jobs at stake clamored for immediate settlements and a chance to get back on their jobs regardless of the strike. Even the few Party members and sympathizers who came from open shops were given releases early and permitted to go back to work. The unemployed were kept in the halls to keep up the semblance of a strike while all the others went back to work.

The strike settlements are very well characterized by the boss who said, "I settled with the Industrial Union because it is the weaker one and I am therefore able to get better terms." The workers who went back to the settled shops were taxed for a strike that was not in existence. The settlements, the conditions imposed upon the workers on their return to the shops, have aroused deep resentment and disgust. Workers are expressing themselves bitterly against the left wing and the Communists. Such is the actual state of affairs among workers who only a few years ago were the spearhead of the militant workers in the American trade union movement and whose heroic mass battles, marked by solidarity and determination, were an inspiration to the entire working class.

What a settlement! No conditions whatsoever gained! A virtual debacle!

These are the fruits of the wrong trade union policy of the Communist Party, "Red" union and TUUL leadership.

What a tragedy for the left wing in the needle trades! A left wing that led masses in heroic struggles, the militancy and heroism of which were an inspiration to the entire labor movement.

The lesson of the dress strike debacle is: Into the mass organizations of the workers, the trade unions! Organize anew and build the left wing! Fight for a program of unity against the bosses, against the reactionary officials in the interests of the workers. Only by building the left wing in the needle trades, by organizing the unorganized, by a fighting program based upon the realities of the class struggle, will a mighty industrial union of all the needle trades workers be achieved and victory won.

Problems of the Negro Masses

WHICH WAY: LABOR OR CAPITAL?

by Will Herberg

(Concluded from last issue)

3. "Collaborating With the White Bosses"

But the most insidious, the most dangerous proposal is at the same time the most wide-spread: the idea that the Negro workers should adopt a conciliatory attitude to the white capitalists, should make "concessions," in order to acquire a better and firmer position in industry. This attitude is common to practically all trends of Negro bourgeois social thought, from the Urban League to Garveyism, as the following illuminating quotations indicate:

"I believe that the interest of my people lies with the wealth of the nation and with the class of white people who control it." (Bishop Carey). (6)

"It seems strange and a paradox, but the only convenient friend the Negro worker or laborer has in America at the present time is the white capitalist. The capitalist being selfish . . . is willing and glad to use Negro labor wherever possible on a scale reasonably below the standard union wage."

"If the Negro takes my advice he will . . . always keep his scale of wages a little lower than the whites . . . by doing so he will keep the good will of the white employer . . ." (Marcus Garvey). (7)

"There is every indication that it is the intention of the great industries to foster and favor the Negro workman . . . For the Negro wantonly to flout their generous advances by joining the restless ranks which threaten industrial ruin would be fatuous suicide."

"At present the capitalist class possess the culture and conscience which hold even the malignity of race passion in restraint . . . Whatever good or evil the future may hold in store for him, today's wisdom, heedless of logical consistency demands that he stand shoulder to shoulder with the captains of industry." (Prof. Kelly Miller). (8)

Is it necessary to undertake a serious refutation of Prof. Miller's remarks about the absence of race passion among the "cultured" white bourgeoisie? Race prejudice as such is an integral part of white

capitalist ideology and it is precisely because the American working class is so bourgeois-minded (i.e., is so backward in class-consciousness) that it has allowed itself to be corrupted, in the most devious and subtle ways, by these "cultured" knights of the rope and faggot. Is not hiding this fact objectively almost the same as defending the lynchings and their protectors?

Is it not obvious that by "collaborating" with the white capitalist the Negro worker would be helping the oppressor play his old, old game: "Divide and rule!" By making himself the tool of the white boss, the Negro worker would merely strengthen the force that would beat him down still further. Certain sections of the white employing class might quite conceivably welcome the "offer of collaboration" made in the name of the Negro workers by the Negro bourgeoisie with the obvious purpose of playing off one section of the labor movement against the other; but what possible advantage—of other than merely temporary, illusory character—such maneuvers can bring the Negro workers themselves not even the persuasive tongue of Professor Miller can make out.

One of the most serious aspects of the Negro bourgeoisie's propaganda of class collaboration between the Negro workers and the white bosses is the fact that it adds fuel to the horrible flames of race prejudice which the white bourgeoisie is fanning (not only deliberately but primarily) thru the objective mechanics of class

The

WITH March practically gone and no tangible evidence of improvement at hand or in sight, the atmosphere is being prepared for postponing fully all hopes of a beginning of recovery until the Fall. The Department of Agriculture report that farm prices have reached the lowest level in twenty years has chilled the ardor of even the most fantastic optimists. All figures still indicate huge declines from the corresponding week of a year ago already seriously depressed and, when compared with the