

Letters from the Mine Workers' Convention

(Continued.)

THE INJUNCTION WHIP CRACKS

Indianapolis, Ind., Sept. 28th, 1921.

HOWAT FIGHT THREATENS LEWIS MACHINE

Indianapolis, Ind., Sept. 26, 1921.

The Lewis machine, which is in control of the United Mine Workers, has decided that Alexander Howat of District 14 must be "broken." The decision must have weighty reasons behind it. The dispute itself cannot explain the fight. The machine has deliberately chosen this fight, and taken as the basis for it, an appeal from the Southwest Coal Operators' Association. And today the administration of the U. M. W. A. definitely threw all that it had into the scales against Howat. They have spoken and said that Howat must be repudiated, or all the charges against the U. M. W. A. made by the coal operators are true. They seem to have staked everything upon winning this fight.

The reasons for this, as is said, are unknown to me. That they are grave reasons is indicated by the fact that, in spite of the unanimous machinery of the administration against him, Howat is very strong in this convention. Howat has all the enthusiasm there is here. How he stands on votes remains to be seen. But the enthusiasm is for Howat, the good speeches are for Howat, the whole atmosphere is for Howat.

Let us suppose for the moment that I were to write a novel. One character is ambitious and unscrupulous, and a rather able man in his way, with some political connections on the side. He receives word through his political connections that certain assistance which he needs in his ambitions can be secured through ridding his organization of certain influences represented by another. Let us suppose that this plan fits in with his own personal desires. Let us suppose that through mutual friends, these forces are acquainted with each other's plans. A sees, too late, that B is much stronger than he thought. If he were making his battle alone he could modify his tactics, but as one section in a wider battle front, he must go through with it at any cost. The Field-Marshal above has commanded it. Forward the the light brigade!

Idle imagination! But one must do something to fill in these great blank spaces which are unexplained. There are some reasons, grave weighty reasons, lying behind this little scrap. This petty fight may easily become one of historic importance in the labor movement.

Today was the third round. The fighting was not so definite and the result not so clear in today's battle. Both sides were weaker, Lewis' side because he had some more members of the Executive Board speak for him. They weaken anything they speak for. Howat was weaker because Frank Farrington entered the lists in his cause; and Frank Farrington can hardly strengthen a cause in this convention except by opposing it. This does not mean, of course, in the voting. A vote is a vote, even in the U. M. W. A. Altogether, today must be said to have strengthened Lewis a little, because his biggest gun, Wm. Green, was shot off today. Mother Jones, entered the program for an hour, received an ovation, and delivered her usual fiery talk, but she was outside of this fight. And Lewis gained a little ground. But this convention is a long way from belonging to Lewis or his machine, and it will take a lot of voting to overcome the powerful sentiment for Howat that boils in Indianapolis.

Some more big fights loom up, but none of them will touch this one. The others will most likely be decided by the roll-call vote which will be taken on this. If Howat wins, other progressive measures will be carried out. If Lewis wins, he will run the rest of the convention to suit himself and those who give him orders.

"Howat was whipped," yells the press with delight.

Yes, Lewis and his Executive Board won on the roll-call vote. The vote was about 3 to 2. Howat carried 6 districts out of 27. Illinois gave him a wonderful vote. It is the back-bone of the U. M. W., the best organized field in the country. The delegates from this district voted more than 95 per cent against Lewis. Lewis drew his strength from the East and South, especially from those fields where fighting is going on. When the smoke cleared away, it was clear that the crack of the injunction whip had carried the day.

A few days ago was "cheering time," but the roll-call came and changed all that. It was interesting to pick out the delegates who were, one knew from first-hand information, in favor of Howat, and yet who voted for Lewis on the roll call. Good fellows, all. But the machine is powerful, and one must be careful when the vote is being written down for all men to see. So not a few cheered for Howat and voted for Lewis.

But today the administration received a setback. The real extent of opposition to the Lewis machine found expression in the vote on the section of the President's report regarding salaries for officials. The Cleveland convention of two years ago authorized an increase in salaries proportionate to the gains achieved for the miners. Instead of following this decision, the Executive Committee passed around salary increases of 60 to 70 per cent. The President's report asked the convention to approve this. It was voted down in a roar of disapproval. There was no chance to crack the Government whip over the delegates on this issue, and the administration lost with hardly a semblance of fight. Secretary-Treasurer Green spoke on "this all important question," as he called it, telling how other unions with small membership paid their officers much more than the miners. He was booed off the platform. Lewis pleaded for the salary-list. He was heard more quietly, but his arguments did not please. He seemed to imply that the miners should bid against the coal operators for the loyalty of the officials. He cited the salaries of mine superintendents as higher than the union officials, and asked the convention to pay as well as the coal owners paid their lackeys. This convention is a poor place for that kind of stuff, and the official machine, on the first issue where they could not bring threats of the government's hard fist, was defeated badly.

"Where do you get that 'gentlemen' stuff?" yelled a voice, when Murray tried to quiet the delegates by calling them "gentlemen." This incident was significant. These men want results; they don't know just how to get them, but soft words are at a discount.

The Lewis administration has won on most issues, but the victories have been costly. On every occasion they have had to fall back on the government. The injunction whip has cracked regularly on every issue, and when it cracks the delegates cring and vote as they are told. But this is a weapon that may wear itself out. The hides of these work-horses may become toughened from too much beating. This official machinery which gets its strength from the heavy hand of the Government will be in a precarious position when the Government openly challenges it again. It has lost its strength with the rank and file, and the victories won in this convention may easily become disasters next spring.

EARL R. BROWDER.