

# Organize the Unorganized

By Wm. Z. Foster

**T**HE greatest and most pressing task now confronting the working class of America is the organization of the many millions of unorganized toilers in the industries. As things now stand the unions, A. F. of L. and independents together, comprise not more than 3,500,000 members out of a total of at least 25,000,000 eligible to join. Organized Labor controls only the barest fringe of the working class, the rest are helpless in the grasp of the exploiters. The great steel, textile, automobile, meat packing, rubber, metal mining, lumber, and general manufacturing industries are either completely unorganized or possess only the weakest and most fragmentary unions. Even in those industries where Labor has some strength, such as coal mining, printing, building, railroading, general transport, clothing, leather, amusements, etc., the degree of unionism in no case exceeds 50%, and in most instances it is far less. This is an impossible situation. The handful of organized workers cannot accomplish anything substantial with such a gigantic army of unorganized arrayed against them. The further progress of the American working class, politically as well as industrially, depends upon the organization of the vast masses of unorganized workers into the trade unions.

## An Opportunity and a Warning

The present time presents an exceptionally favorable opportunity to accomplish this great and indispensable task of organization. Labor is in big demand in nearly all the industries. The workers are in a militant mood and, if approached right, will organize readily. A well-organized campaign would sweep millions of them into the unions. But the present situation is not only a golden opportunity; it is also a warning. If Labor neglects this splendid chance to organize the unorganized it will pay dearly for it in the near future. Our prevailing prosperity is only a passing thing. It cannot last long. A year or two at the utmost is its limit. Then, as sure as fate, will come one of the worst periods of depression that this or any country has ever seen. All signs are pointing that way. And when the inevitable industrial breakdown comes woe betide Labor if it has not had the intelligence and initiative to strengthen its lines by organizing the unorganized. The unions will be crushed. The employers, balked for the moment in their "open shop"

drive by the wave of "prosperity," will renew their offensive with redoubled vigor and will not rest content until they have smashed the backbone of the trade union movement. At its peril will Organized Labor neglect the present opportunity to organize the unorganized.

In this critical situation what are the trade union leaders doing to solve the great problem of organization? Practically nothing. They are drifting with the stream, little reckoning of the cataract ahead. As for the general officers of the American Federation of Labor, the ones who should take the lead in this situation, they exhibit their usual somnolent, paralytic front of stupid indifference. They let slip the golden opportunity of the war time without developing a general plan of organization or even coming to realize that one was necessary, so naturally nothing may be expected from them now. They and their alleged organizers are too busy playing politics and fighting "reds." They are worrying more about disciplining the Seattle Central Labor Council for its progressive stand than they are about organizing the oppressed slaves of the Steel Trust.

## The Official Disorganizers

In the various industries the situation is not much better. With the exception of the clothing-trades unions and the independents, little is being done. The leaders quite generally share the inertia and indifference characteristic of the A. F. of L. general office. In the coal mining industry the best use John L. Lewis can find for his organizers is to send them into the organized districts to play politics against officials who refuse to do his autocratic bidding. Ignoring the fact that the miners will surely have to make a desperate fight, nationally, within the next year or two to preserve their union and the advantages they have won through years of bitter struggle, he completely neglects the urgent task of organizing the hundreds of thousands of unorganized miners in the Alabama, Colorado, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and other districts. In the steel industry the situation is even worse. There is the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers, with only 8,000 members out of some 500,000 in the industry. At its head stands "Grandma" Mike Tighe. So incapable and timid that he could not keep the steel workers organized even if a 100% organization were presented to him on a silver platter,

all he can do in the present situation is to cringe before the autocratic steel barons to assure and re-assure the world that his organization is the most conservative and respectable in the United States. Not a hand does he turn to organize the unorganized. Meanwhile the 12-hour day prevails, to the eternal disgrace of Organized Labor. On the railroads the same stagnation exists. Demoralized by the fatal shopmen's strike, the leaders, instead of trying militantly to recover the lost ground, are busy violating their union constitutions and employing all sorts of desperate schemes to block the movement to amalgamate all the unions into one industrial body. In the other industries similar conditions prevail. The leaders are doing nothing to organize the workers.

There must be an end put to this situation. The labor movement must be roused to a realization of its duty and opportunity in the present period of "prosperity." This means that the militants must become active everywhere. They must build fires under the reactionary leaders and insist that a great campaign of organization be started. If left to their own devices these leaders will do nothing. They are hopelessly lost in the enervating swamp of Gompersism. There is not a breath of life or progress in them. They must be shocked into action. "Organize the unorganized," should be the slogan of every militant. The question should be raised in every local union, central body, state federation, and international union. Only in this way can some headway be made. Our leaders must be compelled to organize the masses. The compulsion must come from the militants, and if it is not forthcoming nothing will be accomplished.

### **There Must Be a New Deal**

To build up the unions more is necessary than simply to whip up the unorganized masses to the tune of the old slogans. This is because the army of non-union workers have lost faith in craft unionism. They can see no sense in joining organizations which have proved incapable of withstanding the "open shop" drive. The railroad shopmen, for example, will never come back to their old unions, isolated as they are, since they have seen these organizations topple like a house of cards even though they were practically 100% organized. They have no desire to repeat such an experience. And the same thing holds true in most of the industries. Craft unionism has lost prestige irretrievably. It can never again rally the workers. There must be a new deal all around. Something has to be done

to re-awaken the workers' hope and enthusiasm, killed by craft union failures. This means that we must raise the banner of industrial unionism, to be achieved through amalgamation. We must approach the workers with a newer and more powerful form of organization. Then, with hope revived, they will come to us in masses. Seeing another chance to effectively combat their oppressors, they will rally again. And they never will rally unless the newer form of organization is offered them. "Amalgamation and an organization drive," that is the slogan that fits our present needs. The whole labor movement should proceed on that basis: on the one hand to re-organize the craft unions into industrial organizations, and on the other, to sweep the masses into the re-organized unions.

### **"Amalgamation and an Organization Campaign"**

Considering the reactionary type of our trade union leadership, it seems a far-fetched and impossible proposal to change the craft unions into industrial organizations and to put on a vigorous organization drive. Yet every intelligent worker knows that this is what must be done if the problem of organizing the unorganized is to be solved. In fact, it is exactly the plan that is being followed in England. In that country the leaders are conservative enough, God knows, but they have at least enough gumption to make some pretense of meeting the situation. The General Council of the Trade Union Congress (which is roughly equivalent to the Executive Council of the A. F. of L.) is conducting a double campaign of amalgamation and organization. It is at once holding amalgamation conferences between the unions in all the important industries and it is carrying on a nation-wide "Back to the Unions" drive in all the big industrial centers. Much progress is being achieved in both directions. It is exactly this kind of movement that is needed in America, only prosecuted more vigorously. What we need and must have is, on the one hand, amalgamation, and on the other hand, a great organization drive in all the industries. When will our reactionary leaders realize this patent fact? To wake them up and to stimulate organized Labor into undertaking this indispensable double campaign of amalgamation and organization is now the greatest task confronting the militants. The organization of the unorganized is the supreme problem of our times. Upon its solution depends the welfare, if not the actual life of the whole labor movement.