

# Amalgamation from Below

By Wm. Z. Foster

**I**N every capitalist country the amalgamation of the trade unions is essentially a movement from the bottom. The rank and file of the craft unions, under imperative necessity to protect their standards of living from the attacks of the employers, realize the insufficiency of these antiquated organizations and demand their consolidation. Never do the bureaucracy display any foresight in the matter, never do they objectively consider the added power which amalgamation would give the workers, never do they, as real generals would, constructively consolidate the union forces as against the growing capitalist power. They are too immersed in their petty job-holding ambitions for that. They stand around inactive until the avalanche is upon them, until the capitalists have administered terrific defeats to the unions and the rank and file are raising a great cry for unity. Then sluggishly they reluctantly permit (permit is the right word) amalgamation to take place from rank and file pressure. In no capitalist country have the trade union bureaucrats, of their own volition, taken the lead in the amalgamation movement.

Nowhere is the rank and file character of the amalgamation movement so pronounced as in the United States. Nowhere else do the bureaucrats offer such desperate resistance to the consolidation of the embattled craft unions. In England, especially after the defeat of the coal miners and the collapse of the Triple Alliance in 1921, the need for unity was burningly felt in the whole labor movement. A great cry for amalgamation, stimulated by the left wing, went up from the rank and file. To a considerable extent the bureaucrats have yielded to this demand. Many have even become mild advocates of amalgamation: the amalgamation movement, which had previously consolidated many unions such as N. U. R. and A. E. U. took on added vigor. Amalgamation occurred in the textile unions.

Much the same has happened in Germany. For many years and especially since the end of the war, the rank and file of the unions finding voice through the militant left wing, have demanded widespread amalgamation. The bureaucrats in many instances have not made an intransigent resistance to this demand. They have grudgingly allowed consolidations to take place in numerous instances, until seven-eighths of the entire movement is now combined into 12 large unions. The Leipzig convention, by a small majority decided eventually to reduce the total number of unions from 48 to 15.

## Balking the Rank and File.

But what a different picture in the United States. Nowhere are the trade unions so hard pressed as in this country, nowhere are they more primitive in character and more unfitted to face the highly organized capitalist class, and nowhere has the rank and file raised such a far-reaching cry for amalgamation as in this country. Under our leadership, fully half of the whole labor movement demanded amalgamation. Yet the bureaucrats ignored this demand completely. With the most desperate resistance, they beat it back. Hardly a single amalgamation have they permitted to take place. In other countries the amalgamation movement is looked upon

as a sort of necessary evil by the bureaucrats, something to which they must yield sooner or later.

But in our ultra-reactionary movement the stupid and venal bureaucrats consider it a dangerous manifestation of Bolshevism, something that has to be fought to the death. They see the unions cut to pieces, but they will not amalgamate them, even though the rank and file cry out for it en masse.

This intransigent resistance of the bureaucrats towards amalgamation (even as to all other militant policies) poses a serious problem before the left wing. Ways must be found to overcome this resistance. Of themselves, the bureaucrats are sterile. They have no constructive policies. They are willing to see the unions destroyed or turned into mere company unions. This is the meaning of their many new schemes of class collaboration, such as labor banking, the B. & O. plan, workers' insurance companies, etc. The bureaucrats, unwilling to fight capitalism, would turn the unions into instruments with which the capitalists can better exploit the workers.

## New Methods Needed.

The problem before the left wing is to find ways and means to bring still greater rank and file pressure to bear upon the bureaucrats, to develop more militant and effective ways of applying the left wing policies, and in this case, specifically, amalgamation. The passage of resolutions alone in local unions and in national conventions is insufficient. The union autocrats blithely ignore all such. They practically tell the rank and file to go to hell, and pursue their own sweet will along the fatal course of reactionary craft unionism. It matters nothing to them that large numbers of the best union members, discouraged at the failure to bring about amalgamation, quit the organization in disgust. Nor do they learn anything from such major disasters as the 1922 railroad shopmen's strike which cost the unions several hundred thousand members. They are dead to the interests of the unions. Their motto is, "After us the deluge." They hang on to their sinecure jobs as long as there is a rag of a union sufficient to pay their salaries. And when it dies altogether, they go for employment to the employers whose friendship they have sedulously cultivated while pretending to represent the interests of the workers.

The struggle for amalgamation must be sharpened, extended and intensified, and thus the bureaucrats made to bend to the will of the rank and file, which so far they have successfully flouted. In my article of September, 1924, in the *Labor Herald*, entitled, "The Next Task of the Left Wing," I gave an inkling of this necessity. The amalgamation movement must be brought still closer to the workers' lives. It must be prosecuted with added spirit and determination. It must take on more than ever a "from below" character. This means that our amalgamation program needs a certain elaboration, a closer and more systematic application than ever before. It must be definitely conceived and carried out under three distinct heads, all closely related to each other; namely, national, local and shop.

### National Movements.

Effective amalgamation usually can take place only when official representatives of the national and international unions assemble in conference, either of their own free will or by dint of strong rank and file pressure, and formally fuse together the organizations concerned. This is the experience of the United States, England, Germany, Russia, and all other countries where labor unions exist and have combined their forces. Hence, to bring about such official national amalgamation conferences must remain a leading objective of the amalgamation movement and every effort should be exerted to this end. A constant agitation must be carried on for the holding of these national unity conferences, to amalgamate all the unions of the country into a series of industrial unions, to amalgamate all the unions in a given industry into one organization, or to amalgamate the most closely related unions in an industry.

The Trade Union Educational League has well understood the necessity for these eventual amalgamation conferences and it has carried on a militant campaign for their calling. It has been the means of passing such amalgamation conference resolutions through thousands of local unions and scores of central labor councils, state federations of labor, and international union conventions. This was work in the right direction and it must be continued with redoubled energy. At present, however, because of the bitter resistance of the bureaucrats in the face of the big rank and file demand, a certain lassitude has fallen upon the amalgamation movement. But this must be relentlessly overcome. The question of amalgamation on a national scale must be made a first order of business in every trade union convention or meeting. The propaganda for industrial unionism through amalgamation must be prosecuted ceaselessly and with determination.

In fighting for national amalgamation, the militants have had to brave the tyranny of the autocratic trade union leaders. We have set up amalgamation committees, although these have been outlawed and banned by the bureaucrats who, if they could secure their arbitrary desires, would ruthlessly stamp out every semblance of the amalgamation movement. We have held national amalgamation conferences in individual industries, which have likewise been officially condemned by bell, book and candle. And we must envisage the calling, eventually, of a great amalgamation rank and file conference of all industries, no matter what the reactionaries may think or do about it. This kind of conference would be a powerful lever to force the bureaucrats into amalgamation. It was by the holding of such an unofficial convention in 1911, at the time of the great Harriman strike, that the militant elements amongst the railroad shopmen, compelled their officials to organize the present Railway Employees Department of the A. F. of L. and to generally accept the principle of federation. It is only when the rank and file speak with such militancy and decisiveness that the reactionary bureaucrats take heed. This, of course, does not justify rash, impatient moves on our part.

### Local Movements.

But this fight for amalgamation on a national scale is not enough. Militant efforts must be put forth to raise the amalgamation issue more effectively upon a local scale and to bring about the greatest possible degree of solidarity among the related unions in the given industrial centers. Movements

must be carried on, of course, to amalgamate, so far as practicable, the local unions belonging to one and the same international, but even more important is it to bring about the closest possible relationship in a given industry between the local unions belonging to several international unions.

A vigorous and effective fight for amalgamation can be carried on in this field. In various industries, such as metal, building, and printing, there are councils already in existence loosely uniting the local unions in their respective spheres. Our campaign of amalgamation must include detailed plans to win over and democratize these bodies, which are now for the most part dead committees of officials. We must fight to give these bodies broader functions, to make them unite more closely the affiliated local unions. This fight must be two-sided: (a) to make these councils appropriate real power in the course of their actual functioning, and (b) to fight in the international conventions for the legal granting of such power to unite more closely the local unions. In industries where no councils exist, as for example in the needle trades, an industry ripe for amalgamation, fights should be initiated at once for their immediate formation upon a broad rank and file basis and with the maximum unity and functions possible. The fake Needle Trades Alliance in that industry must be fought. These very local struggles themselves, which must be directly coupled up with the struggle for amalgamation nationally, will greatly further the whole movement to consolidate the unions and will strengthen the left wing movement generally.

Militant action within such councils can achieve a solidarity theoretically impossible under the union constitutions. This was amply demonstrated in the great packing house movement. The Chicago Stockyards Labor Council was an instrument of real unity for the unions comprising it. Likewise the closely-knit councils that were developed in all important steel centers during the steel campaign of 1918-19. Still another instance that may be noted (of the many on hand) was the well known Chicago District Council of railroad workers, which, in the hey-day of the shop unions, was a powerful center of rank and file propaganda and action, notwithstanding the bitter opposition of the railroad officers. These militant councils cited, had they been controlled by reactionaries, would have been as dead as the ordinary metal, building, or printing trades councils are now. In such local bodies the essence of our tactics must be a persistent insistence upon more power to unite the unions. In spite of official opposition, this must be carried on militantly, although foolhardy impatience must be avoided. More and more functions must be won for such local bodies, more and more they must come to speak in the name of their affiliated unions on all vital questions. But such movements must stop short of actually breaking the locals away from their internationals. The question of national amalgamation must be kept in the foreground always.

But the local amalgamation movement must not stop with work within formally organized councils. Inter-union committees of all sorts should be set up on a united front basis, dealing with various vital issues of the struggle. These can well be used effectively for general left wing propaganda and to emphasize the demand for amalgamation. Along such lines there can be unemployment committees, organization commit-

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Another reason for the lack of response on the part of Latin American unions is the isolation policy pursued by the I. W. W. marine transport workers in the past.

But despite its limited representation, the convention points the way to union of the transport workers of North and Latin America, an immediate and paramount necessity in the face of the encroachments of American imperialism. A second convention will meet on January 15, 1926, in Havana, Cuba.

The Latin American delegates showed plainly that they realize the need for unity and are willing to make sacrifices to attain it. On their part, the wobblers showed an unmistakable willingness to give up many of their old prejudices. They gave up any claim they may have nurtured as to their being the whole works, agreeing to merge with the others in a single federation of transport workers. Moreover, they agreed to refrain from criticizing the political connections of the Latin American unions.

International strike action was decided upon by the convention, a most important decision, even if it proves to be nothing more than a slogan for the present.

The shipping interests may take warning that the workers of North and Latin America are amalgamating their forces, that the day will soon be past when the bosses can attack the unions one at a time in isolated fashion and overwhelm them. When the all-American federation is a reality, carrying on an aggressive, revolutionary struggle against Wall Street, the knell of the bosses' control over transportation will have sounded.

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tees, strike committees, and the like established. In the great fight of the Chicago building trades workers two years ago against the infamous Landis Award, the instrument used by the militant elements was the Publicity Committee which was controlled largely by "progressives" and Communists. The building trades council was hopelessly in the grip of the reactionaries and played no part in the defensive struggle. In the days when he was making a semblance of a fight against the anthracite mine operators, Cappellini, notwithstanding bitter opposition from the local and national labor fakers, built up a network of unofficial grievance committees which he later used effectively to raise his traitorous self into power. Such local rank and file committees can and should be organized in many industries around the demands and needs of the workers. Their struggle and experience can be used effectively to organize the demand for national amalgamation and to put teeth into it.

### Shop Committees.

In addition to the movement for amalgamation on a national and local scale, the amalgamation campaign must be also carried on in the shops. Here it takes the form of a fight to establish shop committees. In the future shop committees are bound to assume tremendous importance in the American labor movement. They must be organized with a broad rank and file representation, not only from the workers in the unions, but also from the unorganized. They will then be the binding element among the workers on the job. They are the future bases of the trade unions. They serve to bridge over the artificial organization barriers still existing between the

workers, and to balk the schemes of the class-collaborationist leaders to divide and defeat the toiling masses. They are the most effective centers of revolutionary propaganda and action. Shop committees when properly organized constitute amalgamation in the shops.

It may be safely prognosticated that a vigorous movement to organize shop committees will meet with the most stubborn and determined resistance on the part of our reactionary trade union leaders. But the movement must be pushed through nevertheless. In England, during the war, when the metal workers, spurred on by the sluggishness of the old trade union machinery, set up shop committees, they encountered the active opposition of the union bureaucrats. But they persisted in spite of this and succeeded, while objective conditions were favorable, in developing a real solidarity among the workers notwithstanding the multiplicity of unions. The shop committee movement in Germany has faced an even more dogged resistance than in England. Every attempt of the Communist left wing to make a revolutionary weapon out of it has been met with wholesale expulsions and general persecution. But the struggle is being continued, expulsions or no expulsions. Under no circumstances could the German Communists meekly submit to the dictum of the controlling bureaucrats that the shop committees, which are officially recognized by the unions, should practically remain on paper and be nothing more than weak grievance committees.

American trade union leaders will resist the shop committee movement much more recklessly and desperately than their English and German prototypes have done. But this resistance must be circumvented. The shop committees must be formed in spite of it and given the broadest organizational base possible. They must struggle to win control over the right to hire and fire and to generally protect the workers' interests in the shops.

### The Everyday Struggle.

Another important consideration is to bring the amalgamation movement close to the workers' lives by identifying it with their everyday struggle against the employers. The masses are not and cannot be interested in amalgamation as such. Only the militants are far-sighted enough to want amalgamation in itself. What the masses want is to win concrete demands, and they are interested in amalgamation only insofar as they can see that it will help them secure these immediate aims. Hence to tie the amalgamation movement up with the everyday struggle of the workers is a fundamental necessity. An amalgamation movement not based upon and locked in with the immediate necessities and demands of the working class is like a locomotive without steam, or a body without life. It is as dead as a doorpost. The great power of the amalgamation movement among the railroad shopmen was its close identity with their memorable strike of 1922.

It is not enough to point out in an abstract way that amalgamation will produce better and stronger unions. This must be demonstrated in the actual struggle itself. Every mass movement of the workers, offensive or defensive, should be accompanied by a conscious drive to consolidate the unions. The shoe workers' militants are proposing to call a general amalgamation convention of their unions. This should set as its definite purpose the fighting of wage cuts in the shoe industry. Similarly, in other industries, the fight against reductions in wages should open the door wide for big amalgamation drives. Wherever the workers are in strug-

gle, whether it is against wage cuts, against unemployment, to organize the unorganized, or whatnot, the agitation should be seized upon and linked up with the ceaseless drive to unite the scattered unions into powerful combinations. By bringing the amalgamation movement down from the abstract and by identifying it with the workers' every day battles it is made into a living factor in the class struggle.

Amalgamation will not come from the top. The bureaucrats will not consolidate their organizations, even though petitioned to do so by vast masses of the rank and file. Our experience teaches this definitely. They must be pushed into it by an irresistible surge from below. The militants must stir the masses, on the basis of their everyday demands, to press resistlessly against the bureaucracy at every point. The amalgamation plans to be worked out by the T. U. E. L. militants in the various industries must bear in mind the foregoing principles. They must develop national, local and shop organizational amalgamation forms and drives. And all must be inextricably interwoven with the struggles of the toiling masses. This way lies the consolidation of our present weak unions and the laying of foundations for a trade union movement capable of playing a real part, not only in the day-to-day war against exploitation, but also in the overthrow of the capitalist system and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

## BOOKS

### Judith Saving Her Soul

This Mad Ideal, By Floyd Dell. Publisher, Alfred A. Knopf. Price, \$2.00

FLOYD DELL'S specialty, as evidenced by his first three novels, is the study of contemporary childhood and adolescence. His new novel is concerned with the same subject. It must be said, however, that "This Mad Ideal" does not reach the mark set by "Moon Calf," "Briary Bush," nor even "Janet March." And there is even less of the class struggle in it. The masses seem to exist somewhere far away.

The tale is told in rather colorless style and language. One does not look back on any section of the story with a reminiscent thrill. It is hard to believe that the man who wrote that breath-taking chapter on burlesque in "The Briary Bush" also is the author of "This Mad Ideal." The outstanding fault of the book seems to be that it had to be forced over some two hundred fifty pages when it could have been told, perhaps more effectively, in about half that space.

In spite of its defects, however, the life story of Judith Valentine, from the age of four to about twenty, is mildly interesting. The picture of the little girl in a small New England village, though overdrawn at times, is charming. The death of Gloriana, her mother, after a short career as a singer, which has followed her separation from her husband and a few years of work "by the day" doing housework, brings Judith into the home of her Aunt Emma in Pompton.

It is here that Judith spends the rest of her childhood and young girlhood. At the age of twelve she learns that girls must not climb trees because it gives boys a chance to look at their legs. For some mysterious reason this must not be allowed. From then on life becomes a struggle between her own conceptions and those of the world of Pompton.

She attends high school and learns that there are "dirty" books, among which Thomas Hardy's "Jude the Obscure" is classed. Unlike Tennessee Franklin, a fellow student, she has not the courage to fight against the tyranny of the school principal, Mr. Sopwith, but finds refuge in writing poetry.

There is an excellent character sketch of Mr. Sopwith, the sincere but mentally short-sighted reformer. Also his son, whom Judith later loves after her fashion, is graphically depicted as a product of parental oppression. Judith strengthens him and helps him to rebel against his father.

The most lovable and vivid character in the book is the editor of the Pompton "Patriot," Mr. Byington. He habitually fortifies himself with alcohol, but "there's a reason." Once he says to Judith:

"Why do I drink whisky all the time? Well, I couldn't tell you that, exactly. But I suppose that if I had started out with a sensible ambition, say, to become an important citizen of Pompton and the editor of the 'Patriot,—why, I might not need so much whisky to get through the day. . . . The trouble is that I started out to be something entirely different. Ideals—that's the trouble. Put it down to ideals. Yes, Judith, the next time you meet a temperance reformer, tell him that the true way to get rid of drinking is to abolish ideals."

Hugh Massingham, a clever newspaper man, boozier, boaster, cosmopolitan and Bohemian, contributes considerably to Judith's education. She absorbs everything he has to tell her of his adventures and loses interest in him.

Finally Judith leaves Pompton, goes to Boston and then to New York, having decided not to marry Roy Sopwith, the sweetheart of her high school days, who is in Boston studying art. She reasons that, being Gloriana's daughter, she could not be happily married. New York holds out the promise of a career and adventure, whereby she can save her soul from all that Pompton would have it become.

On the whole, one can spend a not unpleasant few hours reading "This Mad Ideal," neither losing nor gaining much thereby.—I. D.

### The Bishop and the Famine

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on the ears of the world, the machinery of working class relief was set in motion and tyrannized, landlord-infested, priest-ridden Ireland, will for the first time in her painful history feel the warm touch of international friendship that will alleviate the distress of the famished workers and peasants and draw them closer into the great movement that is rapidly forging the weapons of steel, to sweep aside the obstacles that prevent the useful classes from enjoying the good things of life, while the parasites revel in luxury.

When that time comes, the bishop will have to do some real explaining.