

The Mining Crisis Deepens

By WM. Z. FOSTER

THE situation of the United Mine Workers of America has become considerably more difficult in the past few weeks. The organization, violently attacked by the coal operators and betrayed by its official leaders, drifts constantly into a more critical position. The long years of misleadership by the Lewis regime, which have undermined the whole union, are now coming to a head in the present life and death crisis of the organization.

FAILURE TO SPREAD THE STRIKE

It was a criminally wrong policy of Lewis' ever to have allowed the attack of the employers to become centered upon the key Pennsylvania and Ohio districts. Lewis isolated the workers in these districts from the main mass of miners and thus enabled the employers to concentrate their assault upon them. His splitting away of the anthracite miners from those in the bituminous fields; his failure to draw the unorganized masses into the struggle; his signing of separate settlements in Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, etc., were crimes against the miners which divided them against themselves and made impossible any real fight against the coal operators.

The disastrous effects of this policy, manifest from the beginning to all clear-thinking workers, grew glaringly evident as the months rolled by. Two things became very clear: the first was that the attack in the Pittsburgh and Ohio districts is a menacing attempt to wipe out the union, and the second was that the only way this historically important strike could be won was by drawing into the struggle the masses of organized and unorganized miners and by rallying the great ranks of the working class in militant support behind the miners.

The strategic time to correct Lewis' fatally wrong policy of splitting the miners and narrowing down the strike, was in April of this year. With the treacherous separate agreements expiring in Illinois and the other signed up bituminous states, and with a rising wave of strike sentiment spreading among the unorganized masses, a splendid opportunity developed for broadening out the strike, for intensifying and politicalizing it in the way necessary for it to be

carried to victory. The Save-the-Union movement saw this opportunity and with basically correct strategy, undertook to develop in the face of Lewis' opposition, a national strike of miners, by calling out the unorganized; by holding out Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, etc.; and by gradually mobilizing the anthracite miners for the strike.

The Lewis machine, true to its record of treachery and registering its infamy with one more disastrous betrayal of the miners, set itself like flint against this whole broadening-out strategy. In the proposed strike of the unorganized in Western Pennsylvania, it not only did not assist with the resources of the union, but used all its forces to sabotage the strike. Lewis' organizers were scattered all through the unorganized districts, working hand in hand with the employers and the state to prevent the development of the strike. Added to this treachery were the effects of the heavy, persistent unemployment and the recollections of Lewis' betrayal in 1922 and the fear of new betrayals by Lewis. Consequently, the Save-the-Union committee, with its limited resources, was not able to overcome these obstacles and to pull out the great masses of miners. Nevertheless approximately 20,000 struck, instead of the 75,000 required to make the strike really effective.

In Illinois, Lewis, in active collaboration with the coal operators, sabotaged all efforts to broaden out and consolidate the strike. They signed individual agreements with various coal operators, notably the notorious Peabody Coal Company which has long controlled the Illinois miners union. These agreements, the most shameful in the history of the U. M. W. of A., are a plain betrayal of the bituminous strike and a conspiracy of the labor leaders and the operators against the Save-the-Union movement. They are the forerunners of the open shop in Illinois. They cover only a minority of the miners in District 12 and they bind the employers to nothing, leaving them free to liquidate the Jacksonville agreement if the present strike is lost. Betrayed by their leaders, impoverished by long unemployment, and terrorized by the employers, the Illinois miners in many instances were forced back to work under these separate agreements. A serious blow was struck at the whole program of extending the strike, and thereby at the very life of the union.

DISINTEGRATING TENDENCIES

Other disintegrating tendencies, the fruits of Lewis' criminal policies, are now observable in various sections of the coal industry. Among these are various organized back-to-work movements by Lewis officials in collaboration with the employers. The first of

these to definitely develop was in Missouri, when what is in reality a company union was built up and an agreement reached with a section of the coal operators on the basis of the 1917 scale. Next, in Northern Illinois, a group of several local unions signed for the 1917 wage rate. More significant yet, a Local in West Frankfort, Ill., has just broken with the District and signed an independent agreement. And now in Eastern Ohio, Daugherty, formerly a sub-district president and long a Lewis henchman, is going about holding mass meetings and openly advocating the formation of an independent union and the liquidation of the Jacksonville scale. In Districts 2 and 5, agents of the employers are at work with similar programs, seeking to undermine the morale of the strikers. Although the miners on strike, desperately in need of relief, are displaying unparalleled tenacity, only an exceedingly few breaking ranks, the danger of such back-to-work movements becomes constantly greater. The whole policy of Lewis intensifies, not liquidates, these strike-breaking manoeuvres. He will gladly organize a national back-to-work movement on a wage-cut basis if it can be done. Against the strike-breaking tendencies the opposition must of course fight resolutely. It must struggle against the Company Union back-to-work tendency and against Lewis' separate agreements. It must demand a general settlement on the basis of the Jacksonville scale. Lewis henchmen for weeks systematically spread the most fantastic hopes among the miners that the Senate Investigation would lead to a settlement of the strike. Now, with the investigation manifestly impotent and degenerated into an endless talkfest, these hopes are being liquidated, with a consequent spread of pessimism.

In the anthracite districts, the disintegrating effects of Lewis' policy manifest themselves by a movement, already widespread in the bureaucracy, for the establishment of a separate union of anthracite workers. Many fake oppositionists also support this disruptive and reactionary tendency. The Lewis machine is now spreading illusions that the recent freight rate cut by the N. Y. Central and Pennsylvania Railroads, by removing the rate discriminating against the Union fields, automatically brings about a settlement; but in the unlikely event of such a settlement, it would be a fake, a makeshift to rid the Republican Party of the inconvenience of the strike and a screen behind which the operators would continue their war of union extermination.

Lewis, instead of meeting the Save-the-Union criticisms and opposition by developing a real fighting policy, of course flies further to the right, into the arms of the employers. His answer

to criticism is wholesale expulsion of Save-the-Union leaders and locals, the latest mass expulsion being that of 17 local unions in Eastern Ohio. The disruptive effect of such a course needs no elaboration here. It shows that Lewis will unhesitatingly split the union in his fight to eliminate all that is alive and progressive.

The employers are quick to take advantage of the crisis of the union, to profit from Lewis' failure to develop a real mobilization of the miners. Open-shop sentiment is spreading among them. This is exemplified by the fact that whereas several months ago the union readily secured district settlements in Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, etc., it now can get settlements only with individual operators, and these settlements are far weaker and more flimsy. More and more the employers are demanding the unconditional surrender of the miners.

RANK AND FILE VERSUS BUREAUCRATS

Lewis' policies are leading the U. M. W. of A. straight to destruction. Events of the past few weeks have made this increasingly evident. Only a thoroughly aroused rank and file can save and rebuild the organization among the miners. This can be done only by breaking the power of the corrupt Lewis machine. To do this is the present task of the Save-the-Union movement.

A decisive clash between the Lewis machine and the Save-the-Union forces now rapidly approaches. The rank and file miners in the Save-the-Union movement, who undoubtedly represent the sentiment of the great mass of organized miners, have demanded that district conventions be held. Lewis has replied by wholesale expulsions. Now the miners are calling conventions themselves in the various mining districts to meet the crisis, to oust the Lewis machine, and to take control of the organization. These conventions are but the first steps in the development of a militant policy to collect strike relief, to win the strike, to organize the great masses of unorganized, to regain the conditions and standards lost under the Lewis regime, and to gradually rebuild the organization.

The Lewis machine, backed by the employers and the state, will do and is doing all possible to block this historic rank and file movement. No method will be too violent or too contemptible for them to use. They will surely split the Union rather than give up their hold on it. But all their terrorism and treachery will not stop the forward march of the miners. Lewisism among the miners will fight and struggle bitterly to maintain itself. But its days are numbered. The miners are on the road to freeing themselves of this whole system of treacherous leaders—of organized official subservience to the employers.