

Dilettantism in Strikes

By WM. Z. FOSTER

ONE of the basic essentials for carrying on trade union work successfully is hard plugging. It is necessary that we know how to take hold of a situation with the utmost earnestness and hang on relentlessly. Hard day to day plodding, undeterred by the severest obstacles, must be a characteristic of our activities. Our revolutionary unions confront heavy tasks in the organizations of the workers in the trustified industries, and they cannot succeed unless they are enlivened with this indomitable spirit and generally serious approach to their work.

Unfortunately, however, our present trade union work often does not display these firm, Bolshevik qualities. There is an altogether too light approach to the struggle. Lack of preparation for strikes, underestimation of organization work, too much reliance upon mere agitation—these weaknesses we are already familiar with from many phases of our trade union work in strikes.

Another manifestation of this general weakness is a sort of dilettantism. That is, a tendency to be attracted to the struggle and to make a fight only when the struggle takes on a dramatic character. This manifests itself by tendencies to rush in where strike movements are developing, without preliminary preparations, and, what is even worse, to rush out again without follow-up work, when the strikes have come to an end. This means to see the struggle only where it takes on spectacular forms. We must know how to make our strikes dramatic. This is very essential. But it must not substitute for the brick by brick building of organization, and doing the other Jimmy Higgins work of the union.

This dilettantism was one of the obstacles that the Industrial Workers of the World had to contend with for years. During the period of its militancy, it was one case of fireworks after the other and no real organization work was done. When the strike began, always more or less spontaneously, organizers would swarm into the struggle zone, and when the strike came to a conclusion, the field was deserted. Nor could the I. W. W. overcome this tendency. It was one of the main reasons why the I. W. W. never succeeded in building an organization, even in those instances where it won strikes. It was a liquidator of the serious work necessary actually to build a union.

One does not need to search far in our trade union practice to find traces of such dilettantism. Let a few examples from the

textile industry suffice to illustrate the point. Take the case, for instance, of the Gastonia strike. Undoubtedly, after such an heroic struggle, it should have been possible to crystallize a real organization, but this was not done. On the contrary, there was a certain moving away for new worlds to conquer. Following the New Bedford strike, similar weaknesses developed. Here we won a semi-victory, but, for want of real organization work and a tenacious hanging on to the situation, we did not translate our mass influence into substantial organization. Shortage of forces is not a sufficient excuse for such a situation.

In the Lawrence strike in February once again this tendency came to expression. This time it was even theorized. Comrades put forth the slogan, "The Struggle Is Over in Lawrence," and turned their attention to more spectacular, if not more promising, fields of class struggle. The effect of such an attitude was especially disastrous in Lawrence. It was impossible to have the National Textile Workers Union concentrate the necessary forces in the big mills in this town, where manifestly a new struggle was brewing. The result was that we built little or no organization, although the masses were disposed towards us, and when the recent great strike of 23,000 developed, it found us almost entirely unprepared, and the A. F. of L. was able to secure a powerful foothold.

The general result of such tactics is that we build no real organization. More than that, it is quite easy for us to discredit ourselves even in places where we win strikes. The workers feel that we have deserted them when a characteristic post-strike exodus of the organizers takes place.

In the mining industry the National Miners Union is now conducting a struggle against the usual tendency to demobilize our forces following the strike. It is making a real effort to build its organization in the zone where the 40,000 miners struck, and despite many weaknesses, and although the strike was lost, the N. M. U. is having some success in entrenching itself. This fight must be encouraged against the customary dilettantist flight to new fields of activity.

Again in Lawrence, the National Textile Workers Union is about to be put to the test. We shall see whether or not it has yet developed that bulldog tenacity that enables a union to build itself up in the face of humdrum and undramatic obstacles. The big strike has been broken by the treachery of the United Textile Workers. It would be easy for us now to conclude that the fight is finished and that we can move on, in the usual way, to new

fields. But this would be a disastrous error. We must hang on in Lawrence at all costs. We must maintain a sufficient body of organizers there to develop local organization and struggle. If we do this, we will be repaid with a real organization among the Lawrence mill workers. They will not succumb to defeatism unless we desert them in the hour of defeat. This we must not do.

We must systematically cultivate in the T. U. U. L. the elements of responsibility and relentlessness, particularly in post-strike periods. The real test of our ability to organize the workers comes in just such situations. It is easy to lead struggles when the masses are all in motion, but a real union must learn how to conduct the fight in the trough between the waves of strikes. We must rise equal to the Lawrence situation with a most determined campaign of organization.

THE REVOLUTIONARY CRISIS OF 1918-21 AND THE TREACHERY OF THE REFORMISTS

The first attempts at revolutionary overthrow which sprang from the acute crisis of capitalism (1918-1921) ended in the victory and consolidation of the dictatorship of the proletariat in a number of other countries. These defeats were primarily due to the treacherous tactics of the social democratic and reformist trade union leaders, but they were also due to the fact that the majority of the working class had not yet accepted the lead of the Communists and that in a number of important countries Communist Parties had not yet been established at all. As a result of these defeats, which created the opportunity for intensifying the exploitation of the mass of the proletariat and the colonial peoples, and for severely depressing their standard of living, the bourgeoisie was able to achieve a partial stabilization of capitalist relations. (*From the Programme of the Communist International*).