

Next Steps in the Coal Strike

By WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

THE outstanding lesson of the big national conference of coal miners, held in Pittsburgh on July 15-16, consisting of 685 delegates from the principal coal fields, was the manifest readiness of the miners throughout the coal industry to struggle. The reports of the delegates showed first, that the miners universally confront starvation conditions and second, that they react against this deepening slavery with a militant strike mood. The basis is present for a national strike movement. While our strategy is directed towards the development of such a national strike, our main tactical line is the strengthening of our present strike and extend it to the nearby territories.

The great problem is how this strike can be organized. It would have been very fine if, at the beginning of the strike, a national strike call could have been issued. But manifestly this was impossible because of the weakness of the National Miners Union organizationally and in prestige. The miners would not have responded. And even at the recent Pittsburgh conference the situation was not yet ripe (lack of organization in Southern West Virginia, weakness in Illinois, Anthracite, etc.) for such a national strike call. Hence the conference was compelled to adopt the method of spreading the struggle district by district, with the perspective of a bigger pull later after more organization has been established.

The conference prepared a practical basis for such an extension of the struggle. Its program of general demands gives the whole rank and file movement a fighting platform. Its united front "Miners Unity Committee of Action" provides a means to unite the various disconnected strike movements and rank and file upheavals in the U.M.W.A. with the N.M.U. Its policy of spreading the strike into the various districts on the basis of local programs of demands is a practical method of broadening the fighting front. The holding of the conference was fully justified. If anything, we were a couple of weeks late with it.

The National Conference marks a second stage in the miners' struggle against the operators and their U.M.W.A. and government allies. For this is developing more and more the character of a counter-offensive strike. It would be to completely misunderstand this strike to consider it as merely a defensive struggle. For several years past the miners, demoralized by the loss and betrayal of the great 1927-28 strike, took wage cut after wage cut, until their

standards were reduced from 50 to 75 per cent. Now they are fighting back.

While this strike began as a defensive fight against a local wage cut at the Avella mines, the strike is taking on a counter-offensive character by the raising of the slogan of "Spread the Strike," and by broadening the struggle as far as possible by the unity of the employed and unemployed, by the raising of political issues, which marks the raising of the struggle to a higher level. The first wave of this counter-offensive extended the fight to Eastern Ohio and Northern West Virginia, with 40,000 miners involved in actual strike. The second wave of the counter-offensive, launched by the national conference, aims to precipitate the struggle into Kentucky, Central Pennsylvania, Middle and Southern West Virginia, and Southern Illinois.

With the impetus given by the national conference, such an extension of the fight is entirely within our possibilities. In fact, although the conference (at this writing) is only 5 days past, important steps have been taken to develop the struggle in various districts. In Kentucky, a state-wide conference has been announced, which will undoubtedly lay the basis for a wide strike in that territory. In Central Pennsylvania, a conference of 300 miners, representing 6000 workers, has already been held and arrangements have been made for a second conference (five days from now) at which demands will be formulated and definite steps taken to draw many thousands of miners of this section into the struggle. In West Virginia, a northern conference has just been held and a crew of organizers is being built up. Headquarters will be established at a key point and a state-wide conference organized as soon as practicable. Here will come the problem of drawing in the Keeney movement on a rank and file united front basis. What the West Virginia miners think of the N.M.U. and its program is evidenced by a request (in today's mail) for 2,000 application cards for the miners in the Pursglove mines, signed up under a scab U.M.W.A. agreement. In Illinois activities will be begun immediately to develop a united front between the N.M.U. and the local rank and file movement, under the leadership of an Illinois "Miners Unity Committee of Action." Mass meetings, conferences, etc., will at once be organized. Illinois, because of the local comrades' pessimism and failure to defeat the fake progressive leaders, is the weakest spot in the whole N.M.U. line-up. In the Anthracite, the united front program will also be vigorously pushed.

The hardest part of this program of extending the strike—and the key to all our work—is to maintain firmly the strike lines in the present strike zone. This is a great task. The miners are faced

with starvation, evictions, police terror, U.M.W.A. scabbing, government strikebreaking, etc., on an unparalleled scale. Every effort is therefore being put forth in this area to develop a second wave of attack by the strengthening of the picket lines and strike committees, the holding of a union district convention, organization of unemployment demonstrations, and the general stimulation of the struggle. The great task is, while we spread the strike to new fields, to prevent its collapsing at the heart in the present strike area.

In all this spreading and holding of the strike the question of relief plays a most decisive role. The whole matter of keeping what we have got and spreading the struggle into new territory is entirely tied up with the relief question. And it is exactly in this basic question that we have displayed the greatest weakness of any phase of the strike. Our national miners' relief campaign is perhaps the feeblest mass effort we have ever made. It is tragically weak. We could and should be collecting 20 times as much relief as we are at present. The campaign must be strengthened immediately and at all costs. The workers realize the importance of the miners' struggle and will contribute to its support if we but give them a chance. The fate of our whole strike movement depends upon the instant speeding of the relief work. In the impermissible weakness of our relief work lies the real danger to our strike.

The question of systematically building our Party is likewise of decisive importance. This Party building campaign must be carried on in every mine field vigorously—not only in the present strike zone. Large numbers of miners are ready to join our Party. In every district where there are coal fields the Party building among these workers must be made the first order of business of the Party in that locality. Now is the time to lay a solid backbone of Party among the miners. The building of the Party must not await the spread of the strike, but should, whenever possible, precede it. *A strong corps of Party organizers must at once be put into the mine fields in the various districts. This has also been grievously neglected.*

The present strike of 40,000 miners is by far the greatest mass struggle conducted by revolutionary unionists in this country. Its outcome will be of the most profound importance in the development of the Party and the T.U.U.L. But, big though the present strike is, we have in our hands the possibility for the development of a far greater struggle. Let me repeat that there is clearly the opportunity here to vastly spread the strike of the miners. It is a great task and our forces seem small to accomplish it, but it can and must be done. Let us realize clearly, however, that the immediate and broad extension of relief collection is a fundamental, if not the decisive question in the extension of the miners' strike.