

# The Executive Council vs. AFL Membership

by Wm. Z. Foster

**D**ESPITE the AFL executive council's decision not to support any presidential candidate in this election, various affiliated unions, particularly the state federations of labor, the most democratic bodies in the AFL, are going right ahead endorsing Roosevelt. Up until now some 22 state federations, representing at least two-thirds of the total membership of the AFL, have taken this action and others are constantly falling into line.

The executive council, greatly disturbed at this open flouting of its decisions by the rank and file and lower union officialdom, has loaded up the current issue of the *American Federationist* with an editorial and an article attempting to buttress its untenable position. In doing so it uses some pretty far-fetched and self-contradictory arguments. Thus, R. J. Watt, author of the article, tries to play down political action generally by the workers, saying:

**"We must concentrate on economic functions and seek government action only to the extent necessary to protect basic standards."**

Watt's notion about using political action only "to protect basic standards" runs counter to half a century of AFL theory and practice. Because many times the Federation has come forward with progressive measures, and occasionally even with extensive legislative programs, and has agitated throughout the country to have them enacted into law.

Mr. Watt, a favorite hatchet-man of the



council against progressive developments in the ranks of labor, goes still further with his reactionary argument by advocating that trade unions have not only no interest, but also no right, to act politically. In the true vein of Westbrook Pegler, he says:

**"Even in the most militant PAC unions there are indications that there are probably a few Republicans. I doubt the wisdom of diverting the dues of such a man or woman, even in part, to the defeat of their political idols, however unwise his choice may appear to a self-styled labor statesman."**

**I**F THIS is correct, then the executive council itself has been violating union principles for many years past through its policy of endorsing congressional, state and local (if not presidential) candidates. For certainly such activities have cost considerable money, including that of "a few Republicans" or other dissidents in the ranks. And this, according to Messrs. Watt and Pegler, is quite impermissible. Mr. Watt's theory if followed out would completely paralyze labor politically. The unions would not be able even to support favorable legislative projects, which also costs money.

The editorial writer of the *American Federationist* is about as hard put as Mr. Watt to find arguments to bolster the antideluvian political attitude of the executive council. So he builds himself up a straw man and then proceeds to knock it down. He tries to make it appear that the issue between the

AFL leadership and the rank and file is the formation of a labor party. He says:

**"Those who operate a political as well as an economic organization must take on all the responsibilities of a political party. . . . Even when this is done such a labor party would have to defeat both parties in our traditional two-party system or ally itself with one of them."**

**T**HIS is deliberate misrepresentation. The AFL unions are not demanding the building of a labor party. What they want is simply for the Federation to support a presidential candidate, Roosevelt, along with congressional and other candidates, by means of the regular nonpartisan trade union committees. William Green himself called upon the unions to build one thousand of such committees, in order to facilitate the registration of the workers and to organize their election support behind the congressional and state candidates who have the blessing of the executive council.

In this crucial election the executive council's policy of "neutrality" towards the presidential contest is utterly out of place. The workers in the unions are doing the correct thing by ignoring it. The executive council, despite Tobin, Harrison and other pro-Roosevelt members, is sabotaging the campaign for Roosevelt; but the great mass of members in the AFL, like those in the CIO, definitely understand where their interests lie in this most significant election and, in spite of the obstacles laid in their way by conservative leaders, are actively working for the continuation in office of the present win-the-war, win-the-peace administration.