

## CHAPTER XII

### THE CLOTHING WORKERS' PROGRAM

THE clothing workers have behind them a rich history of struggle. It includes a record of advances and achievements won through militant action. It includes also a record of retrogression wherever and whenever conservative union leadership has been able to divert and check the fighting sentiment of the rank and file.

Every section of the needle workers has played its part in this record of struggle. Moreover, the needle workers' history reveals clearly that these workers will organize not only for winning immediate economic demands but against the grip of capitalism itself. The left-wing groups have always been powerful among the organizations of clothing workers which were long known as the "hotbeds of radicalism" in the American labor movement.

The history of the needle trades industry indicates clearly that the workers must organize into unions under a leadership that is ready and willing to fight. And never for a moment can they afford to surrender their basic weapon, the strike. Only through bitter struggle are important demands achieved. Only through threat of it are concessions enforced and maintained after they are won.

We have seen that the clothing bosses themselves have learned this lesson very well. They are organized into powerful bodies whose tactics are to grant nothing except under compulsion. They will bludgeon, cheat, resort to any wile or stratagem. They have at their disposal the national, State and local governments and through these the armed forces, the courts and the police. Paper concessions, written or oral agreements mean nothing to these employers. They

will concede or abide only by that which is forced from them.

Offers of class collaboration will gain nothing for the masses of workers in this or any other industry. Neither will "no strike" pronouncements nor talk of the "mutual interests" of labor and capital bring them any advantages. The bait of "more civilized methods," of the "conference table," of "standards of production," of governors' commissions and the like has only lured them into traps which increase employers' profits. But for the workers these devices have meant wage reductions, speed-up, unemployment and the sweatshop. Workers throughout the industry are fast beginning to suspect all such substitutes for struggle. All of these schemes which tie the unions closer to the bosses and the business world will be wiped out as the workers develop militancy under class struggle leadership.

A certain tradition of struggle still clings to such unions as the Amalgamated and the I.L.G.W.U. New recruits to the organized labor movement join these organizations with high hope and fervent enthusiasm. But once they have seen their present officials work at first-hand, they often conclude that all they have heard is only the tradition of a vigorous past. To-day they find in them leaders who strive to demoralize struggle, prearranged strikes for "registration purposes" to fill the treasury, and efforts to curry favor with the bosses through campaigns of terrorism and expulsion of militants who dare to lead organized protest.

The mass of the workers in such unions will, in the long run, find their place in the various opposition groups. For they will see through the present officials' policy of yielding step by step to the employers. The rank and file will not for long tolerate a policy of surrendering to the employers without a struggle, for their purpose in joining a union is to gain genuine improvement in their living conditions. The time is not long distant when the oppositions will be able to drive out the misleaders and substitute an honest, militant leadership.

The garment workers, while fighting from day to day for

current demands, must try at the same time to consolidate their unions and resources in preparation for the greater battles ahead. The centralization and concentration of employers' power make industrial unionism necessary. The amalgamation of all needle trades unions into one departmentalized industrial union is the vital need of the hour.

Each department in such a union, while specializing in its own field of activity, would have its work coordinated with other departments through a central executive board. And all departments would be ready to pool all their resources and power in the face of an attack upon any other.

Nothing short of this type of industrial unionism under militant leadership can mobilize the needle workers for effective struggle. The present craft organization of most of the clothing unions, wherein workers within one shop are divided among different unions—such as cutters, operators, pressers and other groups—must be definitely changed. Instead the whole shop must become the basic organizational structure. Every worker in it must belong to the same department of the union, with representation from the shop as a single unit.

With the shop as the basic center of organization, instead of the craft local, mass activity is easily stimulated. The frequent shop meetings arouse and mobilize the workers, while the next higher body, the District Shop Council, is composed of worker delegates sent directly from individual shops. It becomes, in fact, the very pulse of the trade, the direct representative body of the workers themselves. It is the collective will of the thousands of workers in the union.

Such a consolidated industrial union of all the needle trades must represent and fight equally hard for every worker in the shop regardless of skill, age, craft, sex, nationality or color. It must represent the interests of all—the unskilled as well as the skilled, the young workers, the women, the Negroes, the foreign-born and the native-born. Demands of

the present underprivileged groups must stand at the top of the union's program.

The union must immediately come to grips with the vital problems confronting the needle workers to-day. Instead of the present minimum standards of production, it must fight for the establishment of a *maximum standard* beyond which no union worker shall produce. It must achieve a return to week work, wipe out piece work entirely and establish a 30-hour work week. It must make every jobber or manufacturer directly responsible for the wages, hours and conditions in all of the contracting shops which are producing garments for him and these standards must always be on a par with those prevailing in the inside shops. At the same time, and as part of the same problem, it must undertake intensive organizational work in all out-of-town communities to which the employers send work. Every small center and town must be reached and the needle trades standards there raised to those obtaining in the large centers. Home work must be entirely eliminated.

A union that truly represents the interests of needle workers cannot rest content with fighting for its purely economic trade demands. It must also fight for the enactment of social insurance. With unemployment and part-time work spreading like a plague throughout the industry, it must fight aggressively for federal unemployment insurance of the type exemplified by the Workers Unemployment, Old Age, and Social Insurance Bill, H. R. 2827, with payments made by the employers and the state, and its administration in the hands of the workers.\* Such insurance must cover unemployment, sickness, disability and old age. Pending the enactment of such legislation, the union must establish insurance within the industry, paid for by the employers and administered by representatives of the workers.

By struggling for their immediate economic demands, for social legislation, and for their "civil rights," such as the

\* See *Labor Fact Book II* (International Publishers), p. 102.



right to strike and picket, the clothing workers will inevitably be forced into independent political action. The capitalist parties, which most of the A. F. of L. needle-trades officials now support, are the very ones which when in office direct the police against picket lines, issue injunctions and participate in vicious frame-ups against the workers. It is necessary for the clothing workers to join with workers in other industries in the formation of a party of their own—a Labor Party. This Labor Party must be a broad united front movement, based chiefly on the trade unions but including other working class organizations, and the Socialist and Communist parties, as active participants. The I.L.G.W.U. and the Amalgamated are already on record in favor of a Labor Party. However, the leaders of these organizations have thus far done nothing to put their labor party resolutions into action. It becomes the task of the workers in the needle trades unions to push the movement for such a political party, which will be devoted to labor's daily needs. Only when labor is strongly organized on both the economic and political fronts will it be in a position to exert the full force of its power against the bosses and against all tendencies toward fascism in this country.

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To help build an organization of the type we have outlined should become the aim of every needle trades worker in the country. Above all he should not permit these objectives to remain an academic abstraction. And the major task is the struggle for the unity of all existing needle workers' organizations. The preservation of the unity of the labor movement, with all of the workers of a trade within a single united union, is an immediate need of the hour.

The A. F. of L. officials now have it within their power to create such a united movement. The workers, moreover, are demanding that this be brought into being within the A. F. of L. and it is possible that, due to rank and file pres-

sure, the officials will not dare to stand in the way of the formation of a strong united movement.

If, however, a policy of mobilizing the entire strength of the needle workers for effective offensive against the employers is again met by expulsions, blacklisting, sluggings and other forms of terror, these officials will find the clothing workers of to-day determined upon united, militant, class-struggle organization and activity. And, if necessary, these objectives will be achieved over the heads of the present union officials and finally lead to their defeat and to the victory of a broad rank and file movement of workers in all crafts and trades in all the clothing centers of the country.