

HUNGER MARCHES

By I. AMTER

THE hunger marches to the state capitols represent a higher stage in the development of the struggle for unemployment insurance, and therefore their results, politically and organizationally, must be closely studied.

The marches to Trenton and Albany, starting on February 28 and 25 respectively, and among the first that were organized in this country, show that the unemployed workers are ready not only to demonstrate in the cities, but to undergo hardships in the fight for unemployment insurance. They show that the unemployed workers and the employed workers too, are filled with a sense of discipline that is extraordinary. The workers on these two marches understood the political aspects of the march and the rebuff in Trenton and Albany did not surprise them.

In organizing the marches, it was clear that considerable organizational work had to be done prior to the march. The plan of march had to be carefully worked out; the route had to be selected, the stops and lay-overs be measured and fixed, and provision had to be made for food and shelter. This was done by two comrades—one for the Workers International Relief, and the other for the Trade Union Unity League. The former went along the route mapping out and making arrangements for lodging and food, while the other organized unemployed councils along the route.

The response for food and lodging for the marches both on the way to Trenton and Albany, was remarkable. In some places Workers International Relief groups were set up. In others, where there were no contacts previous to the march, and where the workers were intimidated, provision was made secretly for food at a restaurant, the workers helping to supply the money; in others, for the marchers to put up in the homes of the workers. On both marches, good unemployed councils were formed, the workers not only demonstrating in their respective cities and towns for unemployment relief, but also preparing the workers of the city for the reception of the marchers as they passed through.

The march was one succession of enthusiasm. The Albany march starting from New York City, departed from Union Square, marching up Broadway to 42nd Street, through the heart of the city. There the men boarded trucks, which were provided for the long country stretches, and then proceeded on the way to Albany. Everywhere, beginning with New York, the marchers were the recipients of cheers and ovations. Further along the road—Yonkers—where the state cossacks began to interfere, the workers of the towns were intimidated. The marchers were not allowed to get out of the trucks, once they participated in the mass meeting arranged by the Workers Ex-Servicemen's League in Yonkers. The state troopers forced them to keep going along the road, despite the fact that they had a permit to hold meetings in several places. But what does a state trooper care about a permit? What does he care about the fact that he has no authority in a city or town, but only along the highway? He has a gun in his pocket, a long baton in his hand, and that is the LAW!

Nevertheless, along the route, meetings were held in the cities, before factories, in the squares. Everywhere the workers greeted the marchers on their entrance to the city, accompanied them through the city, to the meeting place. Everywhere, they gathered round the marchers, asking questions, telling them about conditions in the factories of their towns, the unemployment situation, etc. At night, it was difficult to send them away, they continued to speak and ask questions.

When the marchers arrived in Albany, meeting the detachment that came from the west from Buffalo and other cities, the reception by the Albany workers was inspiring. Marching through the city with banners and placards, and accompanied by the workers of Albany, they went to the hall arranged for their organization, prior to going to the State Capitol.

The battle in the State Capitol at Albany was a brave battle. The strategy of the committee approaching the State Assembly had been worked out, and the marchers, some in the gallery of the Assembly, others in the street to hold a meeting before the capitol, were prepared. When the three spokesmen, one after the other, were denied the floor and thrown out of the capitol, the men in the gallery began the fight, demanding that their representatives be heard. This was a fight that showed that the Hunger/Marchers, starved as some of them were (18 of them took sick at Yonkers, where they had the first meal, because their stomachs were not used to food), are a determined group. Although they had to deal with husky, burly state troopers with their heavy long sticks, and they, the marchers, had no weapons, they delivered blows to the cossacks, that many of them will not forget. All the fighting, as the marching, was done in an organized manner. When retreating out of the assembly chamber, the marchers reorganized their forces, marched down the stairs—and then some of the marchers, enraged, wanted to return to the assembly chamber to give the troopers another drubbing. But better counsel prevailed, and the marchers, accompanied by thousands of Albany workers, returned to the hall and held a meeting. The next day they returned to their homes in trucks, debarking at the towns from which they came as the trucks passed through, to hold meetings in these towns.

Arriving in New York City on March 4, the night of the Ruthenberg Memorial meeting, the marchers went to the meeting in disciplined ranks, and were received with an ovation. Many of them spoke—and there it was announced that of the more than 180 who went from New York City on the march, 56 of the best had joined the Communist Party.

The march to Trenton was equally effective. In some of the places, Carteret, for instance, the entire town turned out for the march, and accompanied the marchers far outside the limits of the town, insisting upon meetings. Everywhere the same reception. When arriving in Trenton, a splendid group of the Trenton jobless met them and marched with them to the hall that had been prepared. Similarly to the march to Albany, the march was preceded by leaflets, announcing the coming of the marchers. Along the route, leaflets were distributed, telling the workers the aim of the march. Daily Workers and Labor Unity and literature were sold in large quantities.

At Trenton, the committee of the marchers did not succeed in getting to the floor of the Assembly, being outmaneuvered by the sly politicians, who did not dare to let the committee speak. While the committee was detained in a side room, practically under arrest, the workers demonstrated before the Capitol, remaining there for several hours.

The Hunger Marches made a tremendous impression upon the workers of the towns through which they passed. The workers clamor for organization—and it is the task of the Trade Union Unity League to organize them. The workers showed everywhere that they are ready to fight for the Workers Unemployment Insurance Bill and for immediate relief.

In our next article, we shall deal with some organizational aspects of the march.