Shop Committee Movement in the Needle Trades

By JOSEPH ZACK.

THE deeper we get into work amongst the masses of the proletariat, the more able are we to perceive the shortcomings of former methods and forms of organization. We are now entering upon the most important phase of transforming our organizations from social-democratic forms, inherited from social democracy and developed in the era of capitalist expansion and social reformism, into those fit for the era of decay of the capitalist system, our era, where capitalism cannot any longer give the reforms and concessions it could easily give during its period of health, and whence as a result the workers can maintain their standards and progress only thru merciless sharp class struggle.

This sharpening of the struggle, which is the breath and life of our movement, needs new forms of organization and mobilization of the proletariat en masse just as it requires different tactics. Hence, the need of a party based on factory nuclei, and industrial organizations based on shop committees, which is in line to fit the proletariat organizationally for the seizure of power and the overthrow of capitalism.

The world's trade union bureaucracy have long ago realized the meaning of rank and file organization of workers to their fortunes and future. It is no wonder that whenever the workers made an attempt in that direction it is bitterly fought by the bureaucracy. It arose in various forms in a number of countries and under different names, such as shop stewards, shop delegates, factory councils, Betriebstrate, et. It was as a rule an attempt by the rank and file to hit at their exploiters, to defend themselves over the heads and despite the reactionary leadership. It arose as a spontaneous resistance to the class collaboration and selling out tactics of labor's business men. and not having a firm. clear force like the Communist Party behind it, decentralized and undisciplined as it usually was, it was overcome or petered out. Nevertheless, it was the natural form of organization of resistance against the bureaucracy and the exploiters, organized at the place of work. Amongst the labor organizations in the United States, the needle trades witnessed probably the greatest agitation and experience along this line. And the militants of the needle industry have undoubtedly developed the clearest conception of this form of organization, altho they conceived of it mainly as a union reform affair and not as a means to organize the unorganized. The Bolshevik revolution in Russia, which had a tremendous effect upon the needle workers, gave the shop delegate movement in the needle trades a tremendous impetus. The biggest local of the I. L. G. W. U., the old Waist and Dressmakers' Local 25 with 22,000 members, actually attempted to put it into practice (shop delegate system) and participation at the shop delegates' council meetings and enthusiasm ran high. This shop delegates' council, which was sanctioned by the officials under pressure as an advisory body, naturally assumed more and more power for itself so that the bureaucrats forced their dissolution with the present president, M. Sigman, as the executioner. The agitation for the shop delegates' system (which advocated organization in the shop in the form of a shop committee and shop delegates from all shops to form a central body of the trade to manage the union) continued unabated until the T. U. E. L. took the field, when the capturing of executive boards and local offices became the main objective in the first flush of victories. A mild form of shop organization, such as shop chairmen, occasional shop chairmen meetings, price committees, etc., has been officially practiced in the needle trades for many years. The bureaucrats were, however, careful not to let it go beyond that. The program of the Needle Trades Section of the T. U. E. L. adopted three years ago gives an interesting picture as to how the unions' management could be conducted under the shop delegate form of organization and why it is necessary and advantageous from a union point of view. It gives a precise and simple idea as to how a centrilized union can function with a shop committee system as its basis.

"The sharpening of the struggle between the workers and the employers necessitates a much broader participation, a more intense activity on the part of the masses in behalf of the union. With the present small number of active members it is not only difficult to maintain what we have, but well nigh impossible to make progress for the future. The number of conscious active workers must be increased many times the present number. This can, however, not be accomplished without reforming considerably the present bureaucratic system of management and leadership of our organizations. This system must give way to one that will make mass interest and mass activity on the part of our membership possible. The structure, the internal machinery of our unions must be changed to establish the broadest contact with the masses in the shops. We must strive by all means in our power to eliminate all the artificial devices set up by the present bureaucratic system for the purpose of breaking and counteracting the will of the membership.

"In order to accomplish this, our form of organization must be changed so as to make the shop the basic unit of our unions. The present form of our organization of local unions as the basic unit has definitely outlived its effectiveness, and cannot longer serve the purposes of militant unionism.

Remnants of Craft Divisions.

"The craft local as a basic unit of organization may have served a useful purpose when the unions were first organized and the membership small, it may have filled the need at the time when craft unionism was the dominant form of organization in the needle industry. Now it is a remnant of the days that shall never come back, days when craft locals were autonomous with power to negotiate wages and working conditions, separate and irrespective of the other locals in the trade.

"Our industry has outgrown this stage long ago. And our unions have been forced to abandon the old divisions into innumerable powerless craft locals when making agreements with the employers. Changed conditions in the industry has made it necessary to act along trade lines instead of craft, the result was the creation of joint boards which act for all the workers in the trade. The creation of these joint boards, however, has deprived the locals of many of their powers and made them more dependent upon the higher bureaucracy. The membership in the locals being far removed thru the innumerable subdivisions, craft locals, sections, etc., from the present main body of the union, the joint board, and hence unable to directly influence it, is little interested in the impotent quibbles that take place at the local union meetings. The result is an irrepressible lack of interest in the affairs of the union. Usually a local can boast of no better attendance than 5 to 10 per cent of its membership. To the average worker today, the union is an unwieldy machine far removed from his daily life in the shops. He considers it as merely an office where he pays compulsory weekly dues, the interests of the shop appear to him separate and distinct from the interests of the union. Due to these state of affairs within our own organizations it has become possible for the paid officers to usurp much power. In order to establish a closer bond between the shop and the union, to arouse the initiative and individual activity of the rank and file in behalf of the union, to enable the workers to have a more direct influence upon the affairs of the union, to abolish the fruitless organizational craft divisions and do away with the numerous useless craft locals, to truly make effective the principle of 'one shop, one union' the militants will fight for the introduction of the shop delegate system.

What is the Shop Delegates System?

"The shop delegate system will do away gradually with the craft local as the basic unit of organization and substitute in its stead the shop. The workers in the shop being then the basic unit of the organization of the union will then take up all matters pertaining to the union at their regular shop meetings, and thru their delegates to the shop delegates council will be able to bring their wishes directly to the assembled delegates of all the other shops in the trade. The shop delegates' council elected on a proportional basis representing all the workers in the shops of that trade will have full power over all questions of the trade and the management of all union affairs in the trade, acting for all the workers in the trade. The workers in the shops thru their delegates will have the possibility to directly influence and to be represented in this important union body, instead as now being forced to accept the rulings of unrepresentative and often manipulated joint boards which they have no means to influence nor to participate in its deliberations. The executive board and its officers elected by the shop delegates' council will run the machinery of the union, receiving dues, complaints, handle business agents, etc., under the direct supervision of the shop delegates' council.

"Delegates to national conventions of the unions will be elected on a proportional basis by delegates from the shops elected for that purpose, and convening in a city convention of a trade. This simple machinery will not only arouse the interest of the thousands of workers in union affairs but will enable the workers to exert a greater and a more direct control over the affairs of the union. It is a reform that will invigorate our unions and make them more efficient bodies in dealing with the problems faced by the workers in the shops."

We in the needle trades perceived even then that were we placed tomorrow into complete control of the bureaucratic apparatus of the unions as constituted, the first thing we would have to do is to bring about amalgamation at the bottom, in the shops, thru shop committees, and thru them to abolish bureaucratic machinery completely and create one from the bottom up that is fit for the modern struggle in modern industry. If amalgamation from the top would be effected tomorrow with the present bureaucratic apparatus remaining at the bottom, it would be a structure built upon sand. The machinery of the labor lieutenants of capitalism conceived by the needs of the past, maintained for the purpose of choking the fighting spirit, of putting a damper on the class struggle, of faking and manipulating the masses much the same as other bourgeois "democratic" methods, cannot serve the purpose of militant struggle against exploitation.

The shop delegate system, as above indicated, proposes a method of shop organization by each craft or division of a factory proportionately electing its representatives to a committee of the shop (factory), shop committee, Betriebsrate, to represent the workers in all affairs in the shop, as well as in the general shop delegate body controlling the union (shop delegates' council). It proposes to substitute completely the present bureaucratic apparatus of union management and control, which so wonderfully serves the purposes of the bourgeois union bureaucracy, and which, while appearing democratic, like bourgeois democracy can easily enough at any time be legally or illegally transformed into a dictatorship over the workers, as experience has already amply demonstrated, and substitute for it a rank and file system from the bottom.

To us in the United States, where the little that is organized is in the dead grip of the blackest bureaucracy on earth, ideologically bankrupt, organizationally stagnant, and in the process of decay, the problem of organizing the many millions of unorganized is our major problem, this we can only solve if we have a machinery at our disposal not dependent upon the whims and dictates of the bureaucracy, a machinery effective in the places of work. Therefore, the problem of shop committees in unorganized territory or industries is of primary concern to us. Moreover, our policy of entrenchment in the existing unions has reached a degree where its further progress depends upon an even much stronger entrenchment in the factories, mills and unions. We have shown results in agitation, but now, at the pain of stagnation, we must have a machinery under our influence in unorganized and organized industries that will make it possible to press forward to leadership in economic struggles, strikes, etc., linking our efforts and organization in unorganized as well as organized trades in a new, direct, and even more powerful effort on the economic field to break the stagnation and reactionary leadership in the American labor movement. I am firmly convinced that it can be done. If with such a handful of party members (not more than 10 per cent of the party membership even now) participating in our union work we could create, under the auspicces of the T. U. E. L., such results, how much can we do by putting all our members in unorganized industries to the task with the whole party and T. U. E. L. strength behind it on the basis of the shop nuclei. It goes without saying that the party shop nuclei must be the heart and basis of the shop committee movement in the unorganized as well as organized industries. Shop nuclei and shop committees go hand in hand, one without the other is unthinkable. Therefore, the problem of shop committees hinges upon the reorganization of the party on the basis of shop nuclei.

It is neither necessary nor advisable to go into details as to how the shop committee machinery should be linked up or function. Suffice it to say at this time that it is practically the same problem as the one to be solved by the shop nuclei, which will be the basis and parallel to it. The form of organization will have to be adjusted in each case to the peculiarities of the industry and methods of production, but in all industries, including the building trades as well as railroads, the shop committee system can be applied effectively. Most of the committees, especially in the unorganized industries must in the preparatory stages of their activity do their work semi-secretly until the situation is ripe in each instance either for strikes, organization campaigns, etc.

For the needle trades industry, where our movement at present is infected by puny local union politics ad nauseum, the shop committee movement will revive and regain its old militancy as soon as the party gets into action along these lines.

Let me say in conclusion, that shop committees are the road to the organization of the unorganized, the most effective weapon against the bureaucracy—it marks the transition from a policy of propaganda to one of action. It is amalgamation from the bottom. It is the weapon for direct action, class struggle, and victory. That's the meaning of shop committees.

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