

The Trade Unions and Peace

NOWHERE is the national debate on concerted action versus isolation being conducted more seriously than in the trade unions. And nowhere will the results be more important, for the trade union movement is the backbone of the democratic camp against fascism and war. There is no possibility for a determined course of concerted action without the wholehearted backing of the organized working class.

It is therefore highly important to know what are the currents of trade union thought arising out of the great debate now going on.

As late as a year ago, the trade union movement in its large majority was dominated by isolationist moods and ideas, and in general tended to ignore world affairs. In this it was but continuing uncritically the course adopted after the disillusionment of the first post-war period out of which arose the whole isolationist tendency.

With the sharpening of the war danger, however, the trade unions have followed the general trend to reevaluate the whole question. The trend of their debates on the question has been in the direction, more and more, of taking up the position of concerted action and rejecting isolation. This is in accord with the historic tendency of organized labor away from narrow nationalism and toward internationalism.

Taking the labor movement as a whole, it cannot be said that the trade unions stand in the vanguard of the movement for a peace policy based on concerted action. But some sections of the labor movement are standing in the forefront.

First of all should be considered the trade unions which

are connected with the American League for Peace and Democracy (formerly the American League Against War and Fascism). In its Third Congress, in the beginning of 1936, the League had representation of unions combining about 650,000 members; at the Fourth Congress, in November, 1937, the representation rose to over 1,600,000, while additional unions not represented but endorsing the League's program brought the total to well over 2,000,000. This is 25 to 30 per cent of the organized labor movement.

More significant than the rise in numbers, however, is the change in political outlook. At the 1936 congress, the trade unions shared the isolationist moods which caused that congress to adopt a program which straddled the issue of concerted action versus isolation. But in the 1937 congress, the trade unions were in the forefront of the great swing in sentiment which placed the American League squarely upon the side of concerted action.

Upon the issue of peace policy, there is not discernible any clear differentiation between the two main centers of trade unionism, the A. F. of L. and the C.I.O., their differences being mainly in their modes of expressing themselves. The A. F. of L. discourages expression from its lower bodies, and tries to concentrate its pronouncements on peace in the higher officials, while the C.I.O. shies away from taking a position in its higher councils, but grants full freedom of expression in its lower and constituent bodies. The result is that, with the current being toward concerted action for peace in both main branches of the movement, this is shown by the C.I.O. unions mainly through their industrial and local branches, while in the A. F. of L. it is in the main through the expressions of the leaders.

However deep may be the discrepancy between the views of members and leaders of the A. F. of L. on many questions, there is no reason to doubt that on the issue of peace policy the dominant trend was expressed by William Green in the *Ameri-*

can Federationist for February, 1938. Precisely because we of the Communist Party are in sharp collision with Mr. Green on other questions, it becomes all the more necessary to register an important degree of approval of his expressions on this question of peace. The following quotations, taken from William Green's editorial, are fundamentally correct and become of high significance because they represent the views of the main body of the more conservative camp of trade unionism. Mr. Green said:

When the first European country initiated a war of aggression to extend its territories, no concerted effort was made to maintain the integrity of the nation attacked and to maintain respect for international peace and law. Under protection of this international situation Japan made her first raid on China. . . . As a consequence Europe lives in fear of the shot that will proclaim general war. Since the life of the civilized world is organized on a world basis, it is practically impossible for any nation to live within itself, and no nation can escape becoming involved in a general war. The only way to protection against irresponsible nations and to world peace is to set up international agencies for adjusting our common problems and for enforcing the peace of the world. In other words, we must extend to international relations political organization that will reclaim this area from anarchy and conflict.

The majority of the citizens of the United States deeply resent the action of Japan in making an unprovoked invasion of China and waging war upon her civilian population, threatening to destroy one of the oldest civilizations. We condemn such action as do many other countries, but only concerted action can make Japan feel the effects of our disapproval. The A. F. of L. has urged its membership to boycott the manufactured goods of Japan. While that action has been effective, we realize that only a general boycott can bring the desired economic pressure on Japan. We realize that unless the democratically governed people stand together refusing to sell arms and munitions or to make loans to any country violating international peace and law, the other countries, whose interests lie in aggression and arbitrary rule, will make common cause with Japan, and protests of individual countries will be useless.

The central core of Mr. Green's argumentation, namely, the indivisibility of peace and the necessity for concerted action to maintain it, is sound and incontrovertible, notwithstanding that some formulations reveal reactionary prejudices and nationalist preconceptions. In practice, of course, Mr. Green and his associates do not carry out this line. They are opposing international trade union unity, they betray republican Spain, they stultify their boycott activities against Japan by placing it under the Hearstian slogan of "Buy only American goods." Yet it is certainly a fact to be welcomed that the American Federation of Labor is predominantly on the side of concerted action for peace. We can only applaud the main thought expressed by Mr. Green, and demand that the A. F. of L. apply it in life.

The Atlantic City conference of the unions of the Committee for Industrial Organization, held in October, 1937, like the A. F. of L. convention in Denver at that time, adopted a decision for boycott of Japanese goods. It did not, however, adopt a general peace policy.

The first and clearest declaration of policy from the C.I.O. unions came from the convention of the National Maritime Union last summer. It declared for embargo against aggressor governments, help to their victims and concerted action among the peace-loving and treaty-maintaining peoples. This clear-headed and well-formulated resolution was a model of working-class internationalism. It is no accident that it could be unanimously adopted by precisely this union, ahead of the whole labor movement, because the seamen, from the very nature of their work and life, are compelled to think hard and deep and realistically on all questions of war and peace.

In the United Mine Workers' convention, held last December, we had the expression of the largest and most influential union of the C.I.O. The resolution adopted was noteworthy, on its positive side, for its forthright condemnation of Ger-

many, Italy and Japan as aggressors making war "to impose their vicious principles" upon democratic and weaker nations, and for its resolute endorsement of the boycott of Japanese goods. It was further noteworthy for its decisive rejection of all the nostrums of isolationism, and for the emphatic rejection of an attempt to amend the resolution to include a condemnation of Communism. Thus the United Mine Workers took decisive steps away from isolationism, and voided the fascist trap of the anti-Communist alliances, although it failed to give positive expression to a rounded-out program for concerted action.

The Ohio State Convention of the C.I.O. unions, held in February of this year, representing 250,000 members, adopted a resolution repeating the decisive sections of the Mine Workers' resolution, but adding, significantly, endorsement of the O'Connell Peace Bill (H.R. 527) which provides for embargo of the aggressors and help to their victims.

About the same time, the Labor Legislative Conference of Western Pennsylvania, representing several hundred thousand members, took President Roosevelt's Chicago speech proposing quarantine of the fascist governments as the central point for its resolution, which was unanimously adopted. This brief resolution, remarkable for the conciseness with which it declares for a policy of concerted action, is worth quoting in full:

The people of the world are face to face with a new world war with all its devastation, bloodshed and death. The war-mad fascists, Hitler, Mussolini and the Mikado, threaten civilization and the peace of all humanity. From this war there will be no escape unless we protest and vigorously oppose this threatening war menace.

The American people being opposed to war and desirous to maintain peace must add their support to the efforts of all peace-loving people throughout the world to maintain peace and save itself and all humanity from destruction. Therefore be it

Resolved: That this Social and Labor Conference declares its opposition to the war plans of the fascist war aggressors and pledges

to support the peace policies of our President for co-operation with the people of all nations for the maintenance of peace and against fascist war aggression.

Such expressions as we have noted above are typical of the American labor movement's trend of thought in the national debate now going on. They show a tremendous movement to break away from isolationism, and to find the path to peace in concerted international action, in which the United States should take a leading role commensurate with our position in the world.

One important exception to this trend must be noted in the leadership of the Auto Workers' Union, mainly expressed by its president, Homer Martin. In the past few months Mr. Martin has stepped forward as a national leader of the isolationist camp, in fact almost its only important trade union figure. He appeared recently at a New York meeting of the isolationist "united front," which its chairman, Mr. Villard, announced had been organized by "the tireless energy of Mr. Bertram Wolfe," another of the speakers. Mr. Wolfe, it so happens, is a "tireless" member of the Lovestone group, closely associated internationally with the Bukharin-Brandler group, exposed as agents of the fascist governments actively engaged in inciting and preparing war. Mr. Martin, who seems to be particularly ignorant on international questions, takes his policy predigested from his close associate, Lovestone, and openly demands complete acceptance of the demands of Japanese imperialism by the United States government. His isolationist shouting is handy, at this moment, to obscure the unfortunate position in which his policies, under the guidance of Lovestone, have placed the auto union in relation to the labor-hating auto corporations.

The exceptional position of Mr. Martin among labor leaders, as an extreme isolationist, can hardly be taken as an expression

of the real trend of thought among the broad mass of auto workers. The auto workers, like the miners, steel workers and others who adopted the clear-cut decisions for concerted action in Ohio and Pennsylvania, are unquestionably breaking away from isolationism. If they had an opportunity to make a choice by ballot, between President Roosevelt's Chicago speech of last October, and Mr. Martin's recent New York speech, there is not the slightest doubt that they would support Roosevelt against Martin by an overwhelming majority.*

Closely connected with the trade unions are such mass political movements as the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party which controls the state administration, and the Washington Commonwealth Federation which is a rising political power in its state. Both these great organizations are definitely on record for concerted action for peace and against isolationism.

Summing up, we can say on the basis of the evidence that the trade union movement as a whole, both A. F. of L. and C.I.O., is rapidly breaking away from the isolationist moods and ideas which dominated it for many years. It is, with various degrees of clarity, already adopting the basic principles of a program of concerted action of all peace-loving peoples to restrain the war-makers. It will certainly, in the not distant future, become the most solid, consistent and determined fighter to realize in life, in the practical actions of the United States government, the principles of collective security.

New Masses, March 22, 1938.

* Since this was written Homer Martin has not only been exposed and driven out of the U.A.W. as an enemy of labor, but he has been so thoroughly smashed on this issue that his own rump convention abandoned his position as untenable even for it and adopted a resolution for collective security.