

# Lessons of the Shopmen's Strike

By Wm. Z. Foster

FOR years past, but particularly since the advent of the Trade Union Educational League, railroad militants have declared again and again that the present system of 16 separate railroad organizations was incapable of putting up a winning fight against the highly organized companies, and we have demanded a general amalgamation of all the unions into one body. The shopmen's strike has given the most overwhelming demonstration of the soundness of our contentions. The whole thing has been a piteous debacle of craft unionism. The companies have played the various organizations against each other just as they have seen fit, forcing some into the strike and keeping others at work scabbing, exactly as they desired. Consequently railroad unionism has suffered enormously all around, if it has not actually been dealt a mortal blow. The shopmen's strike, evidencing as it did the deplorable lack of solidarity between the railroad trades, is an unanswerable argument for

industrial unionism through amalgamation.

Seven unions on strike and nine at work. The shopmen's organizations battling valiantly in face of terrific odds to bring the railroads to a halt, and the other unions faithfully help the companies to keep the roads in operation. What a pitiful exhibition of working class stupidity. Who can defend such a condition? No one. Yet it was exactly the state of affairs that was bound to develop, and the leaders, who have consistently fought every get-together movement between the organizations, deliberately walked right into it. It was the logical and inevitable climax of their contemptible craft policy of each union for itself and the devil take the hindmost.

## Some Traitors Unmasked

As the great shopmen's strike began the rank and file of the railroad workers generally were stirred to the depths and wanted to make common cause in the fight. They seemed to realize instinctively that the interest of all were directly

at stake. Never in the history of American railroading was there such a splendid spirit of solidarity developed, never such a pure realization that the welfare of all railroad workers, skilled and unskilled, is bound up together. The stage was all set for the most tremendous strike in history, for a movement that would have been gloriously victorious and that would have dealt a heavy blow at the very foundations of capitalism. But the leaders of the nine non-striking unions ruined it. They betrayed their members into the hands of the companies. They compromised the whole fight. They robbed the workers of victory. They are traitors to the working class.

In the great strike there have been so many acts of stupidity committed, so much betrayal of the workers' interests by the leaders that one hardly knows which to single out for mention. Consider for example the attitude of Grable, President of the Maintenance of Way Workers. Could anything be more contemptible? There was his organization, made up for the most part of unskilled, undisciplined, and unstrategically situated workers. Anyone with the brain of a twelve year old child could see that its interest laid in making common cause with the shopmen, that it could not possibly win by going alone. Yet what did Grable do? With the wages of his men cut to starvation levels he went cringing to the Railroad Labor Board seeking to trade on the struggle of the shopmen, offering to sell the integrity of his union for the sake of a few cents per hour increase. And on the strength of a promise of consideration he abandoned the embattled shopmen and went over to the side of the companies. Who can doubt the ultimate ruinous effects of such tactics even upon Grable's own union? If the companies can smash the powerful shopmen's organizations it will not be long until by a mere gesture they wipe out the Maintenance of Way. As the price of this treason the trackmen's organization will probably be destroyed. Unions cannot survive by crawling to the employers and betraying each other. Their very breath of life is to make an intelligent fight together. And this Grable ingloriously failed to permit his union to do when he deserted the shopmen in the midst of the battle.

If the Maintenance of Way, under Grable's leadership, committed crass betrayal, so did the Railway Clerks, headed by Fitzgerald. This union, similarly situated as the trackmen, in that it is made up of inexperienced and undisciplined members, had every possible reason to win in the fight. It, too, had had its wages slashed by the Railroad Labor Board. But, like the Mainten-

ance of Way, it was pulled out of the fight in the crisis. Its leadership quite evidently is proceeding upon the fatal theory that the way for the railroad unions to defeat the militant and ruthless railroad corporations is through a policy of lickspittle subserviency, rather than one of determined and intelligent struggle. Should the shopmen be crushed we may depend upon it that the clerks' organization will be speedily swept aside also. The railroads have nothing but contempt for such conduct as that of the clerks' leaders in this strike. They make use of labor treason and then crush the organizations guilty of it.

Fitzgerald is also to be condemned for his open opposition to amalgamation. At the recent convention of his union in Dallas the body went on record for a complete amalgamation of all the railroad unions and instructed Fitzgerald and the other executive officers to seek to bring it about. He betrayed this trust at the A. F. of L. convention in Cincinnati, where his delegation not only made no fight for amalgamation but did not even vote for their own resolution on the subject, which they had been instructed by the Dallas convention to introduce into the A. F. of L. convention. And now Fitzgerald is writing around the country denouncing as enemies of his organization those who dare to work in accordance with the mandates of the Dallas convention by advocating amalgamation.

### Lee at His Old Tricks

For many years past whenever there has been any signs of an awakening on the part of railroad workers, Bill Lee, President of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, has always been on hand to club them back into insensibility again. Nor has the shopmen's strike been an exception. Lee has done his utmost to facilitate the fight of the companies. He has acted faithfully his usual role of auxiliary to the railroad owners by fighting back every semblance of solidarity on the part of his organizations' membership.

No less than the other non-striking trades, the Brotherhood men in the train service have felt the warmest sympathy for the striking shop mechanics. Almost unanimously they realized that the latter were making their fight; that if the shopmen's unions were destroyed their own will be doomed. A tremendous strike sentiment developed among them. At least one prominent official, Stone of the Engineers, showed some understanding of the situation. Although not bringing his powerful organization directly into the fight as should have been done, he yielded to the spirit of the men to some extent by instructing them not to directly scab on the mechanics by making repairs, and by conceding to

them the right to strike where conditions of work were dangerous either because of defective equipment or the presence of armed guards. These were small enough concessions but the rank and file of the train service men siezed upon them with avidity. Strike movements developed here and there all over the country in strategic railroad centers. The employing class became intensely alarmed. It looked as though the railroad workers, triumphing over the primitive policies of craft unionism, were actually going to strike in a body and really tie up the transportation system of the country. But just then, when victory seemed assured, Lee, loyal servitor of the companies, took a hand and arbitrarily ordered his men back to work. This effectively checked the budding general strike movement and left the valiant shopmen to make the fight alone against the combined power of the companies and the nine non-striking unions. Lee had added one more act of treason to his long and unsavory record.

### **A Battling Rank and File**

The one relieving feature of the great shopmen's strike is the wonderful spirit being shown by the strikers. Seldom have a body of rebellious workers been more harassed than they, and never have any stood up better under persecution. The shopmen's struggle will go down in labor history as the most militant fight ever waged by the American working class up till this time. It is an inspiration to all who one day hope to see the workers strike the shackles from their limbs and become freemen.

Of all the difficulties faced by the strikers there were few except of Organized Labor's own making. Chief of these was the incompetent leadership of railroad unionism in general. Had the high-paid officialdom been worth its salt the workers would have been lined up in such a solid phalanx as to convince the companies from the beginning that their ranks were unbreakable. But as it was, with the leaders keeping the unions apart from each other and thereby destroying all possibility of united action, the companies were directly encouraged to go ahead with the fight. They knew that they could depend upon at least half of the organized workers to stay on the job and to co-operate with the scabs in keeping the roads in operation. The greatest obstacle that the shopmen had to contend with in the strike was the leadership of the railroad unions. This was so utterly unfitted for the situation as to make the fight an almost impossible one.

Another towering handicap against the workers winning the strike was the raw attitude of opposition assumed by the Government and the

courts everywhere. Troops were sent any place any time that the companies wanted them to overawe the strikers; injunctions were issued by the score all over the country and the railroad property everywhere plastered white with them. The crowning infamy of this anti-union campaign was the Wilkerson injunction outlawing at one blow 400,000 peaceful strikers. All of which official tyranny is to be blamed upon no one but Labor itself. For many years Mr. Gompers, backed by weak-kneed henchmen, has forced upon the labor movement his absurd political policy of rewarding friends and punishing enemies, and he has fought down every attempt to found an independent working class political party. The result is that the working class has been reduced to a political zero. The governmental power has passed entirely into the hands of the great employers. And who can blame them for using in the shopmen's strike this power which a reactionary labor leadership has given them? The shopmen have paid a bitter price for the A. F. of L. leadership's political stupidity.

Still another obstacle of tremendous importance that the shopmen had to contend against was the gigantic armies of scabs recruited by the companies. Never has the country seen the like before. Scabs by hundreds of thousands were gathered from the ends of the country and thrown into the railroad shops to take the places of the strikers. It was a veritable deluge of rats. And for this condition, when the employers can so easily assemble such multitudes of strikebreakers, Organized Labor itself must take the blame. Because of the sterile leadership of Mr. Gompers and the coterie of reactionaries gathered around him; because they have desperately and successfully resisted every effort to modernize the labor movement and to make it capable of combating a militant capitalism, the big industries of the country have remained unorganized. They are great reservoirs of industrial rats, perpetuated by our leadership's desperate clinging to an obsolete craft unionism. In the great shopmen's struggle the employers simply drew upon these reservoirs. The enormous armies of scabs used in the strike, like the craft betrayal and the raw opposition of the government and courts, were but shameful monuments to the incapacity of the Gompers regime to lead American Labor.

### **The Work Before Us**

As the LABOR HERALD goes to press a settlement is being negotiated on a number of the roads, including the Baltimore & Ohio, New York Central Lines, Chicago & Northwestern, etc., while the strike is going ahead on the rest, which

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make up at least three-fourths of the total mileage in the country. Such a partial settlement bodes no good for the railroad shopmen. Even if it can be widened out and made to include great numbers of railroads that are yet refusing to adopt it, it will mark a long step backward for the organizations. Almost certainly many of the larger and more strategically situated systems will be lost to the shop unions. The mere fact that such a settlement has to be entered into is a defeat in itself. It would have been entirely unnecessary had the many unions understood to stand together in a united front. Then a clean-cut national settlement covering all the trades and all the roads could have been secured. More, victory could have been won without a strike at all. But we will revert back to the strike settlement in later issues of the LABOR HERALD.

In the meantime in addition to bending every effort towards winning the strike, we must go ahead more determinedly than ever with our campaign for a general amalgamation of all the railroad unions. This is the solemn duty of every militant in the railroad industry. Only by consolidating our organizations into one can we prevent a repetition of the disastrous mistakes made in the shopmen's strike. Already the overwhelming mass of the rank and file of railroad workers are convinced of the necessity for amalgamation. What must be done now is to crystallize this sentiment into definite action. The boycott of our union journals must be broken and the subject of amalgamation discussed in their columns. Active steps must be taken to get all the unions to call a general amalgamation convention. If we will do these things; if we will profit by the experiences of the shopmen and bring all our organizations under one head, then the great struggle of the past three months will well repay the bitter suffering and heartrending effort that it cost. Let us make a reality of the long-dreamed of industrial union of all railroad men.

## A TRUCE IN THE MINE WAR

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so that they will be dependent upon the assistance of the national office. Thus they become obedient voters in the conventions and referendums. Thus bureaucrats hold office from one term to another. But the miners lose thereby.

This vicious system must be broken. The situation next Spring will be a serious one, unless the miners close up their ranks, wipe out the weak spots in their organization, and prepare to go into battle again with redoubled vigor and

power. The rank and file must get busy, in the local unions, in the subdistricts, in the districts, and prepare to swing the ax in the national convention. Action, energetic and intelligent, to force the organization of the unorganized fields, is the crying need of the American coal miners.

But above all the rank and file must be imbued with a fighting spirit. They must understand that this is just one battle in the great war between the capitalist class and the working class, a war which can end only in the establishment of the workers' power and the complete defeat of capitalism. The idealism and spirit arising from such an understanding will carry the miners to victory.

## THE RISE AND FALL OF THE ONE BIG UNION

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### The New Way

I repeat, the O. B. U. is now only a memory of the grand revolutionary effort of four years ago. If it has done no other service it has proven conclusively to the majority of the rank and file that sessionism, under any name or any leader, is a mistake. In Winnipeg the group who runs the remnants of the once promising organization now aim only at the disruption of such unions as the workers still possess, with little or no hope of gaining anything for the O. B. U. Their latest activity was an insidious attempt to create an artificial division in the ranks of the railroad employees, and through the so-called Western Shopmen's Committees, to seriously weaken, if not ruin, the chances of the Negotiations Committee of Division No. 4. For the weak-kneed standpatters on this Negotiations Committee I have no respect, but I have less for the action of the little group of officials calling themselves the O. B. U. Throughout the West their conduct brought forth the sharpest condemnation. If anything further was needed to convince the rank and file that some other philosophy, other than that of split, is required, this filled the bill.

The new spirit of the Canadian militants is to steer clear of the secessionist policy. That method has done enough harm to Labor. The prevailing philosophy today is "no secession, no splits, no dualism." The militants of Canada have at last discovered the real road to industrial power—consolidation through amalgamation, and the Trade Union Educational League. And once they find themselves in a position of power, as the militants of 1918 did they will not make the fatal mistake that was made in the Calgary Conference that initiated the O. B. U. They will stay with the masses and not allow themselves to be hypnotized into destruction by high sounding phraseology and Utopian programs.