

The A. F. of L. Convention

By William Z. Foster

AS THE years roll by the conventions of the American Federation of Labor become deader and deader. Instead of responding to the tremendous urge of social development by mapping out the progressive programs necessary to the advance of the working class, they sink deeper yearly into a morass of inaction and conservatism. They reflect the dying intellectual powers of their chronic dictator, Samuel Gompers. To the uninitiated it looked as though the A. F. of L., at its Cincinnati convention of eighteen months ago, had struck the very bedrock level of stupidity and inefficiency. But the Portland convention, just adjourned, was still worse. The Cincinnati convention, in a faint effort to solve some of its overwhelming problems, did put forth at least the silly proposal, since shelved, that the workers, demoralized and disfranchised, should fight for the passage of four amendments to the Federal Constitution limiting the injunction power and giving them the right to strike. But the Portland convention did not rise to the heights of even that childishness. It stood entirely helpless before many problems confronting it. It did not in fact even realize that these problems existed. It did absolutely nothing of a progressive or even pseudo-progressive character. So far as the policies of the labor movement are concerned the convention might just as well not have been held. It displayed a complete bankruptcy, moral and intellectual, on the part of the A. F. of L. leadership.

Only the Left Wing Alive.

If the old reactionary bureaucracy failed utterly to propose a constructive program for the convention, the so-called progressive elements, Socialist and otherwise, were just as bad. Not a single resolution of any moment whatever did they introduce. The only signs of life and progress came from the left wing elements grouped around the Workers Party and the Trade Union Educational League. Although numerically almost ridiculously weak in the convention, they succeeded in raising the only issues of importance considered by the body. The left wing policies of Amalgamation, the labor party and the recognition of Soviet Russia completely overshadowed everything else handled by the convention. Not only that, but every resolution introduced upon these three subjects was either brought in directly by revolutionary delegates or indirectly by them, by instructions, to the A. F. of L. convention. It was a striking demonstration of the fact that the extreme left wing is the only element in the labor movement today which has a progressive program for the trade union movement. The time was when the Socialists made some pretense at opposition and at presenting a progressive program. But that era has gone completely. The Socialist opposition has evaporated. What little there is left of it has gone to Gompers boots and baggage. It stands for nothing. What is happening is that a new opposition is taking shape throughout the labor movement, an opposition based upon militantly revolutionary principles. The Portland convention was the first time that it had manifested itself on a national scale in the A. F. of L.

The Expulsion of Bill Dunne.

Although professing great contempt for the new revolutionary opposition, the old reactionary bureaucracy spared no efforts to beat it. They knew the dynamic power of the issues promulgated by this opposition, and notwithstanding their attempt to minimize the situation, they and the capitalists newspapers also, had to admit that these issues were the most important coming before the convention. The weapon of the reactionaries to beat the progressive measures advocated by the revolutionary minority was the time-honored one of dragging the red herring across the trail. They set afoot a wild campaign of "red" hysteria. The piece de resistance in this was the expulsion of Bill Dunne, delegate of the Silver Bow Trades and Labor Council (Butte, Montana).

The expulsion of Dunne will long stand out as a monument in the history of the American Labor movement. It will definitely mark the beginning of the new revolutionary minority in the national convention of Labor. For many years Gompers has boasted that the A. F. of L. conventions were the most democratic bodies on the face of the earth, and that no matter how unpopular a delegate's ideas might be he was always sure of a hearing. This pretty fable, so often repeated among trade unionists, was thoroughly exploded in the case of Dunne. He was barred purely because of his political opinions and because he dared to make a fight for them. His expulsion was in violation of a fundamental principle of Organized Labor. No definite charges were preferred. The notorious reactionary, Vice-President Murray of the United Mine Workers, simply moved "That this convention revoke the credentials of William F. Dunne and unseat him as a delegate." Then came the accusation and "proofs" that Dunne was unworthy. These consisted of the usual tirade of character assassination, stupid defense of the capitalist system and its slavish institutions, wild attacks upon everything "red" or even "progressive," and the other asinities which go to make up the reactionaries' mental arsenal against revolutionary ideas and individuals. To this storm of abuse and denunciation Dunne bore himself bravely and sent back as warm a message of revolution as has been heard on the floor of any American labor convention. Then came the cowardly, overwhelming vote against him. The expulsion of Dunne is the greatest compliment ever paid to the left wing movement by its enemies, the reactionary labor bureaucracy. It demonstrated conclusively the fear that is in their hearts at the growing revolutionary minority in the mass organizations of the workers.

Crushing Progressive Measures.

In the violent attacks against Dunne the bureaucracy had created the desired state of hysteria necessary for it to kill the progressive measure coming before the convention. So the three great measures of amalgamation, the labor party and recognition of Soviet Russia were dragged in and guillotined while the excitement lasted. Each proposition was defeated overwhelmingly.



Fred Ellis

Sam

But it would be idle to think that this action represents the opinion of the great rank and file of labor. A. F. of L. conventions are simply gatherings of the higher trade union officialdom, who have next to nothing in common with the great masses of workers. For example, the delegation from the United Mine Workers of America usually consists of about eight members, all general officers of the union or Presidents of the large districts. The representation from the other unions is similarly made up. Nowhere does the rank and file get a look-in, save in the case of a stray delegate or two from obscure central labor councils, with one vote apiece and prestige accordingly. Not content with being reactionary themselves in dealing with all progressive measures coming before them, the bureaucratic delegations do not hesitate to violate openly all instructions they may have from their unions to vote for such propositions. When the amalgamation resolution was put to a vote not a single voice was raised in the affirmative, despite the fact that there were delegations from several international unions and many state federations that had endorsed the very resolution being considered. A similar treason occurred with regard to the labor party and recognize Russia resolutions. Through long dealing with a demoralized rank and file, these mandate breakers have little fear of being called to order for their betrayals.

Particularly pitiful was the role of the so-called progressive delegates in the fights over these three big issues. With but few exceptions they collapsed completely in the face of the "red" hysteria. Well did Bill Dunne sneer at them in his speech and say that even Gompers laughed at their cowardice and the ease with which he could overawe them and twist them to his reactionary purposes. John H. Walker, erstwhile Chairman of the Farmer-Labor Party,

particularly distinguished himself in the labor party debate by coming out flat-footed against independent working class political action. In Portland he completed the job he had so well begun in Decatur.

The Seattle Labor Council.

Along with the three big propositions above noted, the question of the revocation of the charter of the Seattle Central Labor Council was one of the main issues before the convention. This case is typical of the utterly reactionary and cowardly policies and tactics being employed by the ruling clique in the A. F. of L. The Seattle Central Labor Council is one organization that in the past has dared at least partly to throw off the smothering blanket of Gompersism and to do some small thinking upon its own account, staying however within its rights as an affiliated body. For this Gompers decided to humiliate it. Hence his recent demand that it recant its radical ideas. Instead of standing squarely upon their rights and letting the old autocrat lift their charter if he would (they could win control back again shortly) the progressive elements hemmed and hawed and adopted a humble, conciliatory attitude. But this did not satisfy the old red baiter. He had to have his pound of flesh. He has now given the council thirty days in which to recede from its advanced position or lose its charter. The irony of this is that while Gompers is attacking the central body of Seattle for organizing a labor party and demanding the recognition of Soviet Russia some of the largest international unions in the A. F. of L., as well as the most conservative, are endorsing these propositions. For example, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers at its recent convention went on record almost unanimously in favor of the recognition of Soviet Russia; and the Iron Molders International Union has just endorsed not only the recognition of Soviet Russia but also the formulation of a labor party. But Gompers will be very careful about attacking them. They have too many votes in the convention. He will reserve his fire for bodies like the Seattle Central Labor Council which have practically no voting strength whatever. It is certainly to be hoped that the union men of Seattle will discover the courage and fortitude to make a real stand against tyrannical domination by Gompers and will insist upon their rights under the A. F. of L. constitution, even though this costs them their charter.

Major Berry, Convention Idol.

Typically enough, the outstanding figure of the convention, except for the other extreme, Bill Dunne, was Major George L. Berry, President of the International Printing Pressmen's Union. He was the hero of the hour. He had just returned from New York from breaking the strike of the newspaper pressmen there after having goaded them into it. The praises of the capitalists were ringing in his ears for his militant defense of their interests. Gompers also added his mite to the general paean of joy over the defeat of the aggressive pressmen. Nothing loath, Berry, who is also Vice-Commander of the American Legion, took advantage of the occasion to tell the world what the American Federation of Labor stands for. Said he:

"We of the American Federation of Labor stand for four great principles governing industry. These are the ownership of property, an adequate sum allowed industry



Diplomat: "Oof! This is awful; abolish it!"



Same Diplomat: "Ah m-m, this is fine!"

for deterioration, and that all workers, including the managers, get proper compensation for what they put into industry."

The casting of these pearls of wisdom before us swine won Berry another salvo of applause from the reactionary press. "Here," cried they, "is surely a labor man after our own heart." The Chicago Tribune was particularly joyful. It declared, "On such a platform, if followed consistently and without equivocation, we ought to be able to maintain peace and mutual good will forever. The outlook is encouraging." That such a combination of strike-breaker, Fascist, and open defender of capitalism as Berry can stand at the head of one of our international unions and win the hearty applause of an A. F. of L. convention indicates better than almost anything else the present low estate of the American labor movement.

Only The Left Wing Alive

Had the revolutionaries of the left wing not broken in upon the scene and introduced the three subjects of amalgamation, the labor party and the recognition of Soviet Russia, the convention would have been entirely empty. The rest of the business was trivial. A resolution of protest against the injunction and the re-establishment of child labor—for both of which Labor, with its antiquated political policy, is chiefly to blame; a few other aimless resolutions on the amendment of the Volstead law to permit the sale of light wines and beer, and similar inconsequential matters, a "spirited" contest for the selection of the next convention city, a lot of idle talk about organizing twentieth century industries with nineteenth century methods, a few of the personal jurisdictional quarrels, and the unanimous re-election of the whole bureaucratic family,—such was the convention. The whole thing was worse than a pure waste of rank and file money.

One relying for his information solely upon the Portland convention would surely get a dismal picture of the A. F. of L. But the situation is not so bad as that. Although the leadership is intellectually dead, deep in the rank and file of the unions a great stirring is taking place.

More and more the organized workers are becoming intelligently discontented with the old policies and leaders that have just about ruined them. They are listening to the message of the Workers' Party and the Trade Union Educational League. That is what terrifies the old guard. Undismayed by such deplorable exhibitions as the Portland convention, we must push forward with our work of education and organization. The future is ours.

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Published Monthly

Single Copies 20 Cents. Yearly subscription \$2.00
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