

# The Railway Employees' Department Convention

By Wm. Z. Foster

FROM the standpoint of constructive work, the convention of the Railway Employees' Department, recently held in Chicago, was an almost total failure. This was because it neither understood the supreme need of railroad labor, nor did anything to satisfy that need. What railroad workers require above all is a solidification of their ranks, a unifying of their forces so that they may make effective resistance to the powerfully organized employers. But to bring about this vital measure the convention did virtually nothing. Judging it by results accomplished, it was a standpat, visionless gathering which refused even to express a desire for real solidarity.

But, strange to say, if the convention achieved little or nothing in a constructive way, it nevertheless displayed a great volume of radical sentiment. From first to last there was a strong minority, which on a couple of occasions actually became the majority, fighting steadily and consistently, if not always wisely and effectively, to strengthen the bonds between the affiliated organizations and to draw them into amalgamation. In fact the business of the convention was little else than a constant struggle between this minority seeking to progress on towards industrial unionism, and the international officials striving to maintain the present craft alignments. It was a case of industrialism versus craftism. Over it the battle between the two forces raged ceaselessly and manifested itself in every conceivable fashion. It was the bone of contention in the discussions on such questions as the election of new classes of officers, raising of per capita tax, jurisdiction, amalgamation, admission of unions, strike votes, and dozens of others. It pervaded everything, made all issues. And the worst of the thing was that upon almost every issue the industrialists lost and the craftists won. That was the calamity of the convention, the sense in which it was a failure.

## The Fight Begins

One of the first big clashes came over a proposition to enable the Department to elect its own Executive Council. As things now stand the Executive Council is made up of the Presidents of the several affiliated craft unions. The effect of this is to reduce the Department convention

to merely an advisory body, because the Presidents, although handling the business of the Department, are not responsible to it, but only to their respective craft unions. The proposed arrangement would upset this and bring the Council directly under the control of the Department convention. It was an industrialist proposal of first rank and its adoption would have gone a long way towards solidifying the organizations. Hence, the international officials turned their heaviest guns against it. Practically all the Presidents denounced it, likewise many Vice-Presidents and Organizers. But, notwithstanding all the alarmist outcries that its adoption would wreck the whole movement, the resolution actually got the votes of a majority of delegates, so strong was the desire to unify the ranks. The vote was 141 for and 138 against. The project was defeated only by an appeal to the antiquated system of voting by craft units. The six important crafts split three and three on it, but two delegates, one casting the vote of the whole Clerk's organization, and the other of the Switchmen's, made the final vote three crafts for and five against. The thing was lost.

Another battle raged around the question of increasing the per capita tax paid by the Internationals to the Department. At present it is 1½ cents per member per month. The proposal was to increase it to 10 cents. This was another industrialist measure. Giving the Department more money meant to strengthen it and give it more independence in the face of the craft unions. The International Presidents perceived this very clearly. They wanted to keep the purse strings in their own hands, to keep the Department poor so that they might dictate its policies. It was pointed out that last year the income of the Department, through donations, etc., all of which came from the craft unions, amounted to 9½ cents per member per month. But when it was proposed that this should be collected by a regular per capita tax guaranteed to the Department, and not through gifts and voluntary assessments under the arbitrary control of the Presidents, most violent objection was raised. One after another the International Presidents, or their spokesmen, took the floor and stated that if the increased per capita tax was adopted their organizations would quit the Department. Such

tactics, together with all sorts of wild denunciations, it took to force the delegates into line so that a majority could be scared up to defeat the proposition.

## Real Revolt Looms

The never-ending battle of the progressives for solidarity of the railroad trades manifested itself sharply again on the general question of affiliation of the various unions with the Department. Two distinct tendencies to this end were in evidence: one to bring into the Department all the real railroad unions, and the other to exclude the numerous craft unions that were trying to edge their way in so that they might expand at the expense of the existing organizations. Under the latter head the Painters and the Steamfitters were barred, because their entry meant merely to divide and weaken the railroad workers, not to unite them. Under the former head an invitation was extended to the four Brotherhoods to become part of the Department, and the Stationary Firemen were taken in over the strenuous opposition of the administration. This action was taken because it was felt that the Firemen would lend strength to the Department by coming in.

But the real fight occurred over the request of the Maintenance of Way for readmittance into the Department. The Committee reported that this should not be granted until the organization straightens out its jurisdictional squabble with the Carpenters and is reinstated in the A. F. of L. But the progressives would not agree to this; they launched a determined fight for re-affiliation of the Maintenance of Way regardless of consequences. They could not see why the ranks of the railroad workers should be split and this important organization kept detached from the rest simply because petty politicians in the A. F. of L. saw fit to give aid and comfort to the Carpenters' ridiculous jurisdictional claims.

The fight started by Del. Kutz moving to amend the Committee's report so that the Maintenance of Way might be admitted immediately, regardless of its suspension from the A. F. of L. Amendment ruled out of order on the ground that a section of the laws provided that only organizations in good standing in the A. F. of L. can affiliate with the Department. Kutz appealed from the decision, urging the very clever sophistry that the law in question was not in force because it had been laid on the table pending further action by the Convention. It was a quibble, but so eager was the convention to strengthen its ranks by taking in the isolated union, and so little respect did it have for the A. F. of L. heads, that it actually voted in major-

ity to support Kutz's appeal. The appeal was lost, however, as it failed to secure the requisite two-thirds vote.

Undeterred by this preliminary defeat, the progressives waxed dangerously radical. One delegate got vociferous applause when he declared:

"I believe the time is here and now when we should decide who is going to affiliate with the Railway Department and who is going to decide which organizations shall come in.—Are we going to let the carpenters and joiners, the cigar makers, the pattern makers, stone cutters, barbers, peanut peelers, peddlers, packers and polishers tell us who is going to affiliate with this Department?—It is time for us here and now, American Federation of Labor or no American Federation of Labor, to say that the railroad men of all crafts shall be united."

Further attacks were pressed against the Committee's report. Amendment after amendment was offered, but they were all declared out of order on the same grounds. Finally there was nothing left to do but vote on the report. Then the progressives were able to make their majority count by voting down the report. This left the matter before the convention without any recommendation. A motion was then made to admit the Maintenance of Way forthwith. This, too, was ruled out of order as unconstitutional, and the rebels lacked the necessary two-thirds vote to upset the ruling.

This last blow left nothing for the progressive majority to do but to amend the tabled section of the Department's laws so that affiliated unions should not be required to belong to the A. F. of L. This they hoped to be able to do with their majority vote when the matter was brought before the body again by the Law Committee. But when the occasion arrived they were asleep at the switch. Chairman Jewell put the section to the house and it was adopted without objection before the delegates realized what it was all about. This put the progressive majority in the same old difficulty of requiring a two-thirds vote in order to get action. They moved to reconsider the action just taken and though polling 82 votes as against 79, failed to get the requisite amount. An appeal from the decision of the Chair for having declared the section adopted without taking a formal vote on it went the same way. Further attempts to amend the laws so that the Maintenance of Way might be admitted failed similarly. So, finally, the Progressives had to confess themselves beaten and give up.

The fight of the majority to seat the Mainten-

ance of Way, notwithstanding specific A. F. of L. law prohibiting it, was a remarkable illustration of the strong rebellious spirit in the convention. This spirit was the more noteworthy in view of the fact that fully 95% of the delegates were paid officials, system chairmen, each receiving anywhere from \$300.00 to \$600.00 salary, plus expenses, per month. If such high-paid officials were in this mood it may well be imagined what was the state of mind of the rank and file of workers on the roads. The International officials had to constantly exert all their power and influence to keep the convention from running away from them. On nearly every important issue the Presidents, who are usually reluctant to speak, had to take the floor to hold the delegates in check. So standpat was their attitude and so unpopular did they become, that their appearance on the floor was usually greeted with ill-concealed groans.

#### The General Strike Vote

All through the convention the reports of the committees and speeches of the delegates were replete with details of how seriously the organizations are suffering under the "open shop" attacks of the companies. This, in fact, was the basis of the strong radical sentiment prevailing. Most of the delegates realized that the unions were being driven back and they were eager for almost anything that would solidify and strengthen them. A streak of desperation ran through all the convention's proceedings. This came strongest to the fore in the discussion on the question of a general strike of the six shop trades as a means to put a stop to the "farming out" of work, the institution of piecework, the establishment of company unions, and the many other measures used by the companies in their militant efforts to destroy the unions and to reduce the workers to slavery.

From the beginning it was evident that a strike vote would be carried. The only question was what kind of a strike it should be, a sectional or general one. After reviewing the hostile attitude of the Pennsylvania, New York Central, Erie, Western Maryland and many other railroads, the Resolutions Committee presented a resolution providing for the taking of a national strike vote of the six shop trades if the grievances complained of could not be straightened out within sixty days after the close of the convention. This radical proposal did not suit the Administration and they immediately began to war against it. Their plan was to confine the strike merely to the roads affected. Hence Jewell himself pleaded with the convention for an amendment to that end, saying:

"I am going to earnestly suggest to this convention that the second resolve of this resolution be amended so the strike ballot be submitted to the membership on the several railroads that may on the date of the taking of this strike vote, be involved in the conditions complained of in the whereases of this resolution."

The amendment was obligingly made by a delegate. But the convention reacted violently against it. They would have none of its policy of leaving one part of the shopmen at work to scab upon those that were on strike. The sentiment was overwhelmingly for a united stand against the common enemy. So strong was this that not even the International Presidents dared oppose it. For the most part they confined themselves to straddling and to pointing out the difficulties that would have to be faced were a national strike called. Some urged that the unions had no money to finance such strike, and they were told that the men were hungry now and they might as well starve striking as working. Others called attention to the fact that some of the roads had signed contracts with the shop unions, but the contention that the roads took them serious and that the unions should consider them sacred, was laughed out of court. It was, indeed, the time of the radicals. In their determination to fight and to fight unitedly against the oppressor, they swept all before them. The Jewell Administration amendment was overwhelmingly beaten and the original resolution providing for a national strike vote unanimously adopted. It was the one victory of the rebellious spirit of the convention, and it was a veritable triumph.

#### The Amalgamation Scare

From the opening day of the convention it was apparent that amalgamation of the many railroad unions would be one of the most important questions to be considered. The delegates, most of whom realized the imperative necessity of doing something to greatly strengthen the unions, were full of the subject. They talked of little else. No less than 40 resolutions demanding amalgamation in some form or other were before the convention for action. The very air was electric with get-together sentiment.

All this greatly alarmed the old-time railroad union leaders. In fact, some of them became almost panic-stricken. From top to bottom they ascribed the sentiment to the Trade Union Educational League, which lately had been very active among the railroad workers. Their plan was to scare the budding amalgamation movement to death. Caucuses of the delegates were held and dire warnings issued of the sad consequences to follow if amalgamation was encouraged. In this

campaign Mr. Gompers himself did yeoman service. In a conveniently arranged trip to Chicago, where the convention was held, he publicly attacked the League most vigorously. Not content with this, he sent his man Friday, Matthew Woll, to the convention itself to campaign against the League. Ostensibly Mr. Woll was to advocate the union label, but in reality he spent over half his platform time heaping coals of fire upon the head of our much-maligned organization. His harrangue to the delegates consisted of the usual torrent of lies and abuse that are doing service in certain circles as argument against the League's constructive program. How frightened he was at the sudden growth of our educational movement, promising as it does some real progress in the unions, may be judged by his lengthy plea that the delegates should not allow themselves to be made "the tail of a book-selling proposition," as he dubbed the Trade Union Educational League. He declared that the labor movement was watching to see that this alarming calamity did not take place. Seldom has anyone more openly insulted a convention's intelligence than Mr. Woll with his peurile warnings. But then, he was so anxious to head off the League and to save the railroad workers from its terrible machinations that he did not realize the asininity of his remarks.

#### The Thing Fizzles

The general air of expectancy and (for the reactionaries) alarm about the amalgamation movement increased as the first days of the convention passed and the big fights developed over various projects tending towards industrialism. Especially the battle over the election of the Executive Council directly by the convention added fuel to the flame. Another factor was a mass meeting called by the League and attended by fully half of the delegates, at which Wm. Ross Knudsen and the writer made addresses on amalgamation. Practically everybody looked forward to a battle royal on amalgamation in the convention, with a good chance for the principle at least to be adopted. But little came of it. When the actual issue came before the delegates it proved pretty much of a fizzle. The industrialists shied away from it badly and made a poor fight. It is not too much to say that a large portion of them were influenced by the intimidations and red-flag wavings of the standpatters. The measure received only a fraction of the support that it should have, considering the temper of the convention. It was one of the ironies of the convention that the body of the delegates fought consistently for at least a dozen different measures, all making for the fusion of the railroad organizations and the building of the De-

partment into an industrial union, but when they came squarely up against the issue of amalgamation, the very thing that their many fights on the floor were leading straight to, they fell down and failed to support it. When they came face to face with their actual goal they did not recognize it.

The amalgamation question came before the convention in a minority report of the Law Committee, submitted as a substitute for the famous 40 resolutions and calling for a referendum vote of the affiliated unions on the proposition. The standpatters sailed into this, belaboring it from all sides. The historian of the future, studying the development of the movement after the unions have reached the industrial stage, will snicker at the arguments made against amalgamation at this convention. Fully 99% of them were the most trivial nonsense of the outpourings of violent prejudice. Never was the real question of amalgamation met. The poor old Knights of Labor, which all the world knows was merely a mass organization, was dug up from its grave and made to serve as an industrial union. Likewise the American Railway Union and the One Big Union, both secession movements pure and simple, were cited as horrible examples of the folly of amalgamation. Even President Wharton, who used to be a progressive, was not above putting forth such intellectual trash. He was a pinch-hitter for the Administration and was brought into the convention to close the debate on amalgamation, which he did. It would be a waste of time and space to analyse his trivial remarks on the subject at issue.

But if the standpatters made no real arguments against amalgamation it must also be admitted that the latter's proponents made few in favor of it. They were too much on the defensive. They spent too much time telling what it was not and too little telling what it was. Outside of a couple of speeches, there was very little meat in the many talks favoring amalgamation. Quite evidently many of the industrialists had been a little overawed by the violent campaign made against it by Mr. Gompers and other officials. Also, two mistakes were made by the minority of the Law Committee. The first was in reducing the proposition to merely an amalgamation of the eight trades affiliated to the Department, whereas it should have covered the whole sixteen. But something much more serious was their failure to present a concrete plan of amalgamation when called upon to do so. Jewell put their shoulders squarely to the mat when he demanded something more definite than the mere

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car after car of scab coal. The Coal Kings are cashing in on the strike at tremendously increased prices, with the assistance of the railroaders. In fact, if the men on the railroads had entered into a deliberate alliance with the employers to break the miners' strike, they could not work more effectively to that end than they are doing. Knowing, as every wide-awake worker does, that the great industries of steel, mines, and railroads, are owned by exactly the same financial interests, they should recognize the need for one common fight against the common enemy. But still the unions seem not to have learned that their interests are class interests, not craft interests.

Such a shameful situation cannot be accepted without protest. The question of active solidarity with the miners should be raised in every local lodge and system federation; railroad men should get their organizations unitedly to refuse to handle scab coal.

### FOSTER MAKES WESTERN TRIP

**B**EGINNING early in July, the secretary of the Trade Union Educational League will make a trip through the West, covering the principal cities. He will lecture on "The Crisis in the American Labor Movement." If your city has not received a date for a meeting, write to the League, and an effort will be made to arrange such a meeting. The routing will be closed within two weeks.

### AN OPINION OF THE LABOR HERALD

**I**HAVE just read No. 3 of THE LABOR HERALD. It is the most stirring reading that has come to my eyes in many long months. I can't resist the temptation to say that the quality of it is astonishing—astonishing to me, who expected much of it. The startling thing about it is its complete success in getting away from "dead matter," or "boiler plate" filler, and, what is perhaps more noteworthy, its plastic adjustment to the entire gamut of national Labor Union events and situations of the day.

"The first article on the Coal Strike is such a relief from the miles of unenlightening news-type that I've been reading—it is informative. Then the same gait is kept up all the way through, or, in fact, the juiciness of the stuff increases with each page. Knudsen's stuff makes a man know a lot of things about the Metal Trades that he didn't know before—interesting thing that you like to remember.

"And then—Gee whiz! I can't keep it up; it would be too much like a recommendation column in Lydia E. Pinkham's advertisement.

"The mere fact that THE LABOR HERALD has drawn together an array of writers who can only be classified as the best trade union brains in the United States, is enough. That it is being edited in such a manner as to play a steady stream of

a consistent point of view upon all of the labor events as they occur, makes it a thing to be wondered about.

"I keep asking myself how it happened. Yesterday, there wasn't anything but a desert of half-dead, unconnected, meaningless "labor papers" kept going by artificial respiration; and suddenly today we find a garden teeming with ripe fruit. Evidently, the makings of it were there all along. And now, irrigation.

"Salutsky's article on the needle trades situation is very keen, I think. It is big calibre stuff. For meaningfulness, it is almost like a business letter. Nobody would write a business letter unless he had to convey certain information. I'm delighted to see that this month's LABOR HERALD is just as merciful upon its readers and the paper supply, as any business manager is in writing letters.

"Well, I haven't said much, but you must know that my heart is pumping fast with enthusiasm for the marvelous thing you are doing. And I'm very happily amused with seeing that you smoked Sam out. I hope you printed a big edition.

*Robert Minor.*

### RAILWAY EMPLOYEES' CONVENTION

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word amalgamation and they replied that they had no plan to offer. The greatest argument against amalgamation was the failure of its advocates to adequately present and defend it.

The convention accomplished absolutely nothing in a constructive way, save possibly the ordering of the strike vote, and that could have been done about as well by the Executive Council itself. Representing the craft idea, the Administration was content to defeat the progressive stuff proposed by the industrialists. They, themselves, proposed nothing new. Apparently, in the present desperate situation of the railroaders, they believe there is nothing to be done but to run around in the same old circle. The convention left off just where it began. It was the old story of marching the army up the hill and then marching down again. This is a sad fact but a true one. The only encouraging feature of the convention was the prevalence of such a large body of progressive thought. This indicates a similar condition among the rank and file. It is to be hoped that this spirit will grow and expand so that when the next convention of the Department assembles the delegates will come instructed to merge our many weak and detached railroad unions into one, militant, all-conquering combination. To bring that about is the task now before live wire railroad workers.