

THE AWAKENING OF THE WEST

By WM. Z. FOSTER.

ALL over the United States there is a sharp radicalization of the workers, under the pressure of the economic crisis, and, more than most of us realize, under the inspiring influence of the Soviet Union. This new spirit is exemplified in many ways; by the big unemployment demonstrations, the growing strike movements, the increased militancy of the workers. But nowhere is it more striking than in the West. Indeed, there is a veritable awakening taking place among the workers of the western states.

For many years, the West was the stronghold of the revolutionary movement in the United States. The heroic battles of the old Western Federation of Miners, the many struggles of the I. W. W., the deeply entrenched A. F. of L. unions, the strong and (at that time) quite militant sections of the Socialist Party—all testified to the glowing revolutionary ardor of the workers in the West.

But about a dozen years ago, with the onset of the long period of prosperity, the old-time fighting spirit among the Western workers seemed to evaporate. The I. W. W. declined in numbers, influence and fighting spirit, the A. F. of L. unions were broken up or passed almost wholly to class collaboration policies, the S. P. lost the last traces of any militancy it once had and most of its organizations also. The workers seemed hardly to have a kick left in them.

Now, however, the West is coming back with a bang. Again the workers are beginning to display their old-time militancy and fighting spirit. A veritable wave of radicalization, born out of the intolerable economic conditions, is now sweeping over the whole West. In the struggle of the coming period, the workers in the western states will play a big and decisive role, and this time, of course, the workers movement will be broader in scope, deeper politically, and of a more lasting character generally.

This new spirit was quite manifest to me at the very edge of the West, St. Louis. There the T. U. U. L. unemployed council meeting was the best gathering held by revolutionary workers for at least 20 years, the memory of our local comrade, running back so far as a better meeting. In the midst of living conditions that are terrible, the workers, both black and white, fairly radiated with enthusiasm and fighting spirit.

Kansas City was a repetition of St. Louis, but even more clearly expressed the new militancy of the West. Again the comrades declared there had not been such a fine meeting for many years. It was made up of splendid proletarian elements.

In Kansas City, I came into contact with comrades fresh from the Oklahoma oil fields. There the situation is truly inspiring. The workers, the large majority of whom are native-born, are displaying the keenest militancy. It reminds me of the great days of the I. W. W. in Goldfield.

Omaha, with an excellent meeting, emphasized afresh the rising fighting spirit of the workers. Many times, I have spoken in Omaha during the last years, but this was the best meeting I ever saw there, not only as to size and proletarian composition, but especially with regard to enthusiasm and militancy.

Denver, after a big unemployment demonstration the day before, turned out a crowd of 1,300 at the admission. It was splendid—the same enthusiasm, the same militancy, the same basic worker elements. The capitalists, who also everywhere sense the new spirit of the workers, had mounted police for a block in every direction from the meeting hall.

Then, last night, came Salt Lake City. This meeting and the circumstances surrounding it, are a real symbol of the awakening West. A few weeks ago we had almost nothing in Salt Lake

City. Then, by virtue of some good organizing work and our correct line, the workers began to rally to our leadership in force. The demonstration on February 10th had 5,000 present, about 45 per cent of the total unemployed in Salt Lake City. And at my meeting, 2,000 workers absolutely jammed the big theatre, while several hundred more outside, vainly sought admission. Not even the oldest-timers can remember such a meeting in Salt Lake City. And it just vibrated and rang with fighting spirit.

Behind these meetings, of course, deep upheavals are preparing in the industries. The oil workers of the Southwest, faced by 75 per cent unemployment and ferocious wage cuts, are in a state of wide foment. The miners of Colorado, confronting a wage cut of 30 per cent and living under starvation conditions generally, are seeking a way to fight back. And the steel and agricultural workers of Colorado, the packing house workers, etc., of Kansas and Nebraska, are stirring with active resentment, which only awaits a degree of organization and leadership to break into active struggle. Doubtless the rest of the West will show a similar picture of deepening working class discontent and movement as I have encountered up to this point in my present tour.

At present these big mass movements develop around the issue of unemployment relief. But they also reflect the general radicalization of the workers. We must be skillful enough to spread the movement over into the industries. Out of our big unemployment movement, we must establish T. U. U. L. unions all over the West.

An important angle of the situation is that it enables us to better our connections with the poor farmers, especially in the Southwest. These, with the starving oil workers, the drought-stricken farmers, unite in common struggle. We must improve this opportunity to reach the toilers on the farms.

Militancy is the keynote of the movement in the West. In Oklahoma the Governor finds it necessary to call out the troops to combat the February 10th demonstrations. In Denver, our comrades heading a big demonstration, brush past the police, enter the state capitol and make fiery speeches to the astonished legislators, who reply by mobilizing the local police force for my meeting. In Salt Lake City, our comrades, with thousands of unemployed workers supporting them, submit their demands to the Senate and House, speaking before these bodies and advertising my meeting in this heart of the local capitalist government. We must learn how to develop this growing fighting spirit with a still much sharper mass application of our slogan "Workers, Don't Starve, Fight!"

Let us not misunderstand the political meaning of meetings of 1,300 in Denver, and 2,000 in Salt Lake City, and especially the big movements in the Oklahoma county. The masses in the West are beginning to stir and they are looking to us for leadership.

We must not fail them. In the West, the workers are beginning to test out our Party as the practical leader in the class struggles.

We must be alert to improve this promising situation. The Party must give immediate attention to the West. Our forces there must be strengthened at once. We must establish new districts in the liveliest areas. We must find more leading comrades to put in the field. We must call Western conferences to unify the work of our party in these states. We must become conscious of the possibilities of the whole situation and act at once. While intensifying our work in the East and South, which like the West, is rapidly awakening, we must also develop the forces to lead and organize the awakening western workers.