
THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR AND TRADE UNION PROGRESS

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PART I

THE LEFTWARD TREND OF THE A. F. OF L.

IT is quite evident that the unions comprising the Committee for Industrial Organization have made decided progress during the great upsurge of the working class of the past few years. This progress is organizational, ideological, political. The C.I.O. unions have adopted the industrial form of unionism, united some 3,000,000 workers in the hitherto unorganized open-shop basic industries, dealt a mortal blow to company unionism, developed more advanced tactics (sit-down strike, mass picketing, etc.), worked out a system of centralized action between the various C.I.O. unions, drawn in new strata of unskilled and white-collar workers, set up closer relations with the farmers and middle class, etc. They have taken a long step forward politically by the organization of Labor's Non-Partisan League and have also developed a progressive point of view on many political questions—fascism, peace, labor legislation, etc. They have become a powerful factor in building the democratic front. In short, the expansion of the C.I.O. unions, by broadening out the structure and

viewpoint and political alliances of the trade unions, has advanced the labor movement from its traditional narrow craft status far along towards a broad class basis.

The advance achieved by the C.I.O. is obvious, but what is not so evident is that during the New Deal era, the A. F. of L. has also made considerable progress. True, its progress is modest in comparison with the spectacular achievements of the C.I.O.; but it is real, nevertheless, and of great significance. If the Leftward trend of the A. F. of L. during the past several years has not been more clearly remarked by analysts of trade unionism it is chiefly because these people have been so blinded by the brilliance of the C.I.O.'s forward march that they have been prevented from seeing the dimmer outlines of the A. F. of L's progress.

The advance of the A. F. of L. has manifested itself in various aspects of its industrial, political and social outlook and struggle. But at the same time the A. F. of L. continues to show serious conservative, or even reactionary, hangovers in various fields of its work, and these are a constant threat to the advances that the organization has made in recent years. It is the purpose of this article to evaluate the

progress made by the A. F. of L., as well as to point out the negative influences in the organization, and then to draw necessary conclusions from them.

First, let us see along what lines the A. F. of L. has made progress, after which we shall discuss how this progress occurred and what it signifies.

RE-ADOPTION OF A STRIKE POLICY

One basic feature of the progress made by the A. F. of L. during the New Deal period has been the development by its unions of a more militant strike policy. It will be remembered that following the loss of many big strikes in the steel, meat packing, textile, railroad and other industries, just after the World War, the A. F. of L. unions, from 1922 all through the boom period, dropped their militancy and developed practically a no-strike policy. Falling in line with the employers' drive for more production at lower costs, the A. F. of L. leaders degenerated the unions largely into means for speeding the workers—on the false theory that if the workers produce more they would more or less automatically receive higher wages and better conditions.

Cheaper and faster production became the A. F. of L. watchword. William Green declared: "The union is the workers' business agency for industrial efficiency." Strikes were pronounced obsolete; the unions hired efficiency engineers, and cooperation with the employers in speeding production became the new way to emancipation. The class struggle was condemned as a relic of the jungle past; Marx was declared definitely defeated by Henry Ford. It was the

period of union-management cooperation, of the "new wage policy, of the "higher strategy of labor."

The effects of all this on the unions were disastrous. The number of strikes declined. About the only important strikes in this period were in the "sick" industries—coal and textile. No serious organizing work was conducted. Trade union democracy was almost destroyed and a fierce Red-baiting campaign raged throughout the labor movement; for the "new wage policy" demanded that at all costs the resurgent militancy of the workers should be suppressed.

The general result of this no-strike policy was that for the first time in their history the trade unions failed to grow in a period of industrial prosperity. In 1922, at the beginning of the Collidge prosperity, the A. F. of L. had 3,195,635 members; but in 1929, at the boom's close, the figure had declined to 2,933,545. Union morale was at its lowest ebb in the existence of the American labor movement. The no-strike policy had brought the trade unions into a grave crisis, even while the prosperity period still lasted.

But the great renaissance of the labor movement, born of the 1929 industrial crisis and beginning in 1933, shattered this poisonous official A. F. of L. no-strike policy. Despite the warnings of the A. F. of L. leaders (to which Norman Thomas added his voice), a great strike wave swept the country—in the coal, steel, textiles, auto, and many other industries, one of the high points of which was the great San Francisco general strike of 1934. In this wave of struggle the Communist Party and the Trade Union Unity League unions played a big

part. Before it subsided, the stifling A. F. of L. union-management, speed-up, no-strike policy of the Coolidge period was largely a thing of the past.

The general result has been that the A. F. of L. unions have developed considerably more militancy. A. F. of L. strikes are an everyday occurrence these days, and now no one is surprised even to see A. F. of L. unions (to the horror of their leaders) engaging in sit-down strikes and mass picketing. Much organization work is also being carried on, one example being the strides that have been made towards reunifying the railroads. Probably about 1,000,000 new members have been brought into the A. F. of L. crafts in the past few years. As a natural result of this increase of trade union militancy, there has been somewhat of an improvement of democracy in the A. F. of L. unions, the former terrific campaign of Red-baiting in the unions—with expulsions, sluggings, etc.—being greatly diminished. For if the unions pursue a more aggressive policy there is not such great need for the leaders to repress the rank and file as there was in the days of the union-management, no-strike regime.

INCREASED POLITICALIZATION OF THE A. F. OF L.

The improvement in A. F. of L. militancy on the industrial field represents important progress; but what is even more significant is the decided advance in politicalization that has also taken place in the A. F. of L. during the past several years. Under the pressure of the big political mass movement, of the New Deal era, the A. F. of L. leaders have had to aban-

don many of their old foggy, "pure and simple trade union" anti-political ideas, and the A. F. of L. officially has thus definitely extended its conception of labor class politics. This lays the basis for more organized mass political action in the future.

Take, for example, the question of wages and hours legislation. From the time of its foundation the A. F. of L. opposed all minimum wage and maximum hour laws for adult male workers in private industry on the grounds that it constituted both an infringement upon the natural functions of the trade unions and an enslavement of the workers. Said a resolution in the 1914 A. F. of L. convention:

"The A. F. of L., as in the past, again declares that questions of the regulation of wages and the hours of labor should be undertaken through trade union activity, and not be made subject of laws through legislative enactments, excepting insofar as such regulations affect or govern the employment of women and minors, health and morals; and employment by federal, state, or municipal government."

At the same convention, Gompers remarked typically:

"If we can get an eight-hour law for the working people, then you will find that the working people themselves will fail to have any interest in your economic organizations."

This and many other A. F. of L. conventions consistently rejected various proposals for eight-hour day and minimum wage bills.

Such an anti-political attitude towards wages and hours legislation, based on the contention that it "would destroy the unions and make serfs" of the workers, persisted in A. F. of L. official policy right down to the New Deal period. But after that

time, we find the A. F. of L., pressed by the new political moods of the masses, endorsing the 30-hour week bill in 1933 and openly lobbying for the present-day national Wages and Hours Bill. And, of course, the reactionary fears of the A. F. of L. leaders have not been realized, such legislative demands are not injuring the unions, but, on the contrary, are occurring precisely in their period of greatest growth and militancy and are giving them further stimulation and breadth of vision.

A similar broadening of the A. F. of L.'s political outlook has also taken place with regard to legislation in various ways making towards compelling corporations to deal with trade unions. The A. F. of L. always opposed such legislation on much the same grounds as it did wages and hours laws—that it infringed upon the unions and tended to throw them under government control. But the A. F. of L., compelled by mass pressure to depart from this traditional notion, now supports the Wagner Act; its controversy with the N.L.R.B. relates primarily to the personnel of the Board and the latter's alleged bias in favor of the C.I.O. and industrial unionism.

The A. F. of L. has also, in the past several years, been constrained to adopt a more political attitude towards social insurance. For many years, its position was that the unions, with their benefit features, should take care of social security matters—with the general exception of workmen's compensation for accidents in industry. Thus, characteristically, in 1921, Gompers declared: "If we should establish the so-called unemployment insurance, every action of

our life, insofar as it refers to labor and employment, would be subject to the regulation and the discipline and the decision of the government." But, at long last, the A. F. of L. is coming around to an understanding that the trade unions cannot possibly handle these gigantic and growing problems and that the federal government must intervene. Hence, we now see the A. F. of L. officially supporting legislation for unemployment, old age and health insurance.

The A. F. of L. is similarly taking a more advanced position towards government regulation and ownership of industry. The Federation leaders have always been notoriously opposed to all such legislation, although upon a few occasions they have been compelled to adopt still-born resolutions on the subject. In 1920, under the pressure of the radical Plumb Plan movement of the powerful railroad unions, they were forced to endorse government ownership of the railroads; Gompers, in his fight against this measure, suffered the greatest convention defeat of his career. The demand, however, remained a dead letter, and was dropped altogether in 1925 by the A. F. of L. But now, in the present railroad crisis, we find William Green, at the recent Railway Employees Department Convention, again stressing the demand for government ownership of the railroads. The A. F. of L. was also compelled to support the National Recovery Act, as well as other New Deal legislation regulating finance and industry.

Still another aspect of the growing politicalization of the A. F. of L. is that body's adoption of a more international position. After many years

of isolation from the world labor movement (as distinct from the International Labor Office of the League of Nations), the A. F. of L. has just resumed its affiliation with the International Federation of Trade Unions, although in that body its representatives have already exercised their reactionary role by fighting against unity with the unions of the U.S.S.R. Moreover, the A. F. of L. leaders, who have had their confidence in their capitalist friends badly shaken by the harsh fate suffered by many reformist German trade union leaders at the hands of Hitler, have developed a definite fear of fascism. This is affecting their political politics. Thus they are also more than ever interesting themselves in the maintenance of world peace. Indeed, William Green's recent statement on how to check the fascist aggressor powers goes far in the direction of the policy of collective security and is more advanced than any peace program that has yet emanated from the C.I.O. Calling upon the "democratically governed peoples" to "stand together," Green says:

"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."

PART II

THE ROLE OF THE C.I.O.

From the foregoing brief resumé it is quite clear that the A. F. of L., pressed by the harassed masses of toilers, has made considerable progress during the past several years. It has adopted a more militant policy on the industrial field and has materially

broadened the scope of its political work. But its progress was not fast enough. The A. F. of L. did not keep pace with the imperative needs of the workers. The result of this was the split—a great progressive section of the A. F. of L. burst through the hard shell of conservatism encrusting that organization, expanded rapidly into the new and dynamic Committee for Industrial Organization, and gave to the masses the leadership and organization of which the A. F. of L. was incapable. Now let us trace briefly the development of the split.

THE A. F. OF L. KING CANUTES

When the great crisis of 1929 roared down upon the country, it found the A. F. of L. quite incompetent to defend the interests of the masses. The trade union movement was in the hands of a corrupt and reactionary bureaucracy still drunk with its prosperity illusions of the boom period and paralyzed with its no-strike policies and union-management cooperation fallacies. This leadership logically fell into the tail of the reactionary Hoover administration, acquiesced in its hunger program of sharing-the-work and no relief for the unemployed, and so, Canute-like, tried to hold back the great tide of working class discontent that was beginning to sweep in irresistably.

While the Communist Party, in the vanguard of the developing mass movement, stimulated the workers in the early years of the crisis to strike against wage cuts, and conducted its great mass struggles of 1930-33 in support of unemployment relief and insurance, the A. F. of L. leaders sought

to kill off these mass activities. They condemned all attempts at strikes and they voluntarily accepted wage cuts; they applauded the police for violently breaking up Communist-led unemployed demonstrations; and, especially, they fought against federal unemployment relief and insurance. At the 1931 Boston convention, when some 15,000,000 were unemployed, the A. F. of L. leaders violently asserted that unemployment insurance would break up the trade union movement; the A. F. of L., as at many previous conventions, once more officially condemned this measure, as follows:

"Compulsory unemployment insurance legislation such as is now in effect in Great Britain and Germany would be unsuited to our economic and political requirements and are unsatisfactory to American workers."

For their no-strike, no-fight policy, which vastly weakened the workers' resistance, the A. F. of L. leaders were glowingly praised by the great capitalist interests, who also slobbered over the betrayed workers for their "moderation" and "loyalty" in bearing the burdens of the crisis. But the A. F. of L. reactionary policies could not stand in the face of the huge unemployment, wholesale wage cuts in every industry, decaying unions, and mass starvation in cities and on the farms. The rising discontent of the masses, which the Communist Party did so much to stimulate and organize, eventually burst forth in the vast political movements, strike waves and organizing campaigns that ushered in the New Deal and were, in turn, further developed by it.

This huge movement of mass struggle shattered the ultra-conservative policies of the A. F. of L. The bureau-

cratic leaders had exposed their bankruptcy and inability to lead the starving people and they were simply pushed ahead by the tremendous upsurge. They had to drop their opposition to unemployment relief and insurance and also to other forms of social insurance; the great spontaneous strike wave smashed their no-strike policy, a hang-over of the Coolidge "prosperity" era; the sweep of progressive legislation made them abandon their antideluvian notions about wages and hours laws and various other forms of labor legislation. In short, the Leftward progress of the A. F. of L., which we have already noted above, began.

THE BIRTH OF THE C.I.O.

A. F. of L. progress, however, was too slow. The masses were running far ahead of their \$10,000-\$25,000 a year trade union leaders. The snail-pace forward march of the A. F. of L. official political policy and program could not satisfy them; so they turned to Roosevelt for guidance and gave his New Deal powerful support. And, likewise, the A. F. of L.'s still weak strike policy also proved inadequate. Especially, with their dinosaur-dated system of craft unionism, the A. F. of L. officials could not give leadership to the great demand of the workers in the open shop mass production industries for trade union organization.

This soon became evident when the great strike and organization movement started in the mass production industries in 1932. The A. F. of L. began to respond to its pressure. But its response was weak and uneven. True enough, the unions that were later to form the body of the C.I.O.—

the miners, needle trades and textile workers—reacted rapidly and took quick advantage of the situation; they carried on many militant strikes and rapidly built up their membership; but the bulk of the Federation craft unions lumbered along at a much more leisurely pace. The A. F. of L. as a whole, did not respond fast enough. The masses ran on ahead, and one of the significant phenomena of 1932-33 was the growth of a large independent industrial union movement of some 400,000 members, principally in the basic industries—of which 125,000 were affiliated to the Trade Union Unity League. There was also talk of establishing a new federation of labor.

Green, Hutcheson, Wharton and the other reactionaries controlling the A. F. of L. Executive Council were both unwilling to lead the great mass organization movement so swiftly developing, and incapable of doing so. But a section of the trade union officialdom—Lewis, Hillman, McMahan, Howard, etc.,—did realize the significance of the mass upheaval and the unparalleled favorable industrial and political situation for trade union organization. So they stepped forward to give the masses progressive leadership, raising the key question of industrial unionism, without which elementary reform in union structure and methods, manifestly the mass production industries, could not be organized.

Now, for many years, with their customary snail's pace (as against the seven-league-boot strides of trustified industry), the A. F. of L. had been slowly broadening its primitive craft unionism through the various trades

taking in laborers and helpers, by setting up tottering federations in various industries, and (once in a blue moon) by amalgamating an anaemic craft union with a larger and stronger one. But the A. F. of L. nabobs, with their vested interest in the still narrow craft unionism, confronted by the correct demand of Lewis for industrial unionism in the basic industries, could not adjust their slow rate of progress to the urgent need for the necessary great leap ahead into industrial unionism. They stepped on the gas a little bit, making a few concessions in the direction of industrial unionism in the auto, rubber, and certain other industries. But this was obviously not enough; and so, after futile struggles in the A. F. of L. conventions of 1934-35 to get a favorable decision on industrial unionism, Lewis and his supporters had no recourse but to set up the C.I.O. and to begin organization work, which they did on November 9, 1935.

Thus, the split came, not because one section of the labor movement was going forward and the other backward, as many think. The whole trade union movement was advancing on both the industrial and political fields. But there was a difference in tempo between its industrial and craft sections, the former traveling rapidly, the latter crawling along. It was this difference in the rate of progress that eventually tore the labor movement in two. The most progressive section of the A. F. of L., later becoming the C.I.O., was forced to step ahead and take up the work of organization that the A. F. of L. as a whole was incapable of doing.

The rest of the story is well known

—the C.I.O.'s splendid organizing and strike victories, the winning of the great open-shop industries for trade unionism, the building up of the C.I.O. unions from 1,000,000 to 4,000,000 members, the treacherous, illegal suspension and eventual expulsion of the C.I.O. unions from the A. F. of L., the A. F. of L.'s campaign of sabotage and strike-breaking against the C.I.O., the development of a wide-open split in the labor movement, the extension of this split to the political field, etc.

PART III

THE NEED FOR TRADE UNION UNITY

The central task before the labor movement, in order to consolidate the progress, industrial and political, that has been achieved, in different degrees, by its two sections, the A. F. of L. and the C.I.O., and to create the conditions for a further general advance, is to accomplish trade union unity. So long as the present split in the ranks of labor endures the whole progress of the trade union movement, past as well as present, is in jeopardy.

Concretely the danger lies in the strategically placed high command of the A. F. of L. These reactionaries not only hold back the labor movement, but if the mass pressure were relaxed against them, they would drag it backward. The A. F. of L. top leaders are responsible for the split. They deliberately chose it rather than risk the dangers to their official positions and the change in the status of the skilled crafts which they believed would result from the influx of huge masses of semi-skilled and unskilled workers into the unions. They have not hesitated to descend to strike-

breaking, sabotage of organizing campaigns, betrayals in elections and in fights for labor legislation, etc., in order to defeat the rising new movement of industrial unionism. They are now trying to develop a class collaboration, anti-C.I.O. agreement with the big employing interests that would be a real setback for the whole labor movement. And their support of the near-fascist Hague in Jersey City shows to what dangerous lengths their war against trade union progress leads them.

To overcome this negative influence of the A. F. of L. reactionaries it is fundamentally necessary that the militant new armies of the C.I.O. be merged with the A. F. of L. on the basis of industrial unionism in the mass production industries. The long-isolated railroad brotherhoods should also be brought into the general consolidation. This new unity and infusion of new blood would greatly raise the progressive tone and tempo of the whole labor movement. The membership would acquire new power and enthusiasm; this union leadership would be revitalized, and labor's progressive farmer and middle class allies would take new heart. Trade union unity would liquidate the grave danger of defeat and reaction inherent in the present split situation. It would give an enormous stimulation to the formation of the democratic front, and it would be the best answer to the rising danger of reaction, fascism and war.

But before trade union unity can be accomplished there are a number of erroneous ideas to be cleared away. First, there is the contention that attempts to bring about a merger be-

tween the A. F. of L. and C.I.O. are useless, because the A. F. of L., based upon an obsolete craft unionism, is dying out anyhow. But those who argue in this way grossly underestimate the vitality of the A. F. of L., which was strikingly evidenced by the manner in which its affiliated unions withstood the heavy shock of the rise of the C.I.O. There are many industries where craft unionism can still live.

There is also the argument that craft unions and industrial unions, by their differences in structure, are fundamentally incompatible with each other and cannot live together in the same national trade union center. But there is no basis to this contention. In many countries craft and industrial unions work peacefully side by side. And in this country there was no real reason for the split except the narrow, unprogressive attitude of the craft union leaders.

Still another objection to trade union unity maintains that craft unions and industrial unions cannot be linked together because the former, made up principally of skilled workers, are inherently conservative, while the industrial unions, based primarily upon semi-skilled and unskilled workers, are by that fact inevitably progressive. This, it is claimed, explains why the leadership of the A. F. of L. is conservative and that of the C.I.O. progressive.

In all this argumentation there is a grain of truth, but also much error. While skilled workers are usually inclined to be less progressive than unskilled workers, this is by no means always the case. Often unions of skilled workers stand at the head of

progressive currents in trade union movements. And it simply cannot be said that the leadership of industrial unions is always progressive and that of craft unions always conservative. Recent American labor history teaches many instructive lessons to the contrary. Take the United Mine Workers, for example. Now it is the head of the historic C.I.O. movement, but only half a dozen years ago it was one of the most conservative-led unions in America. Or, take the reverse case of the Machinists Union. This craft union is at present one of the bitterest opponents of the C.I.O., whereas for many years it stood in the very forefront of the progressive unions of this country and was an ardent advocate of industrial unionism.

The plain fact is that the C.I.O. and A. F. of L. are fundamentally homogeneous. They are but two parts of one basic trade union movement and should be united. The interests of their members are practically identical, and there is nothing in the program of the C.I.O. that the great majority of A. F. of L. members would not vote for if given an opportunity to do so by their autocratic officialdom.

The variance in tempo in the rate of progress of the A. F. of L. and C.I.O. during the past several years, which we have remarked above, does not flow from essential differences between the two bodies. It is basically a result of the different attitudes of their respective leadership. On the one hand, the C.I.O. leaders, progressively-minded, put themselves at the head of the awakening workers and did a great deal to facilitate their advance. But the top A. F. of L. leaders—the

Greens, Hutchesons, Whartons, Wolls and Freys—real reactionaries, have used their official power against the A. F. of L. workers' progress and have had much effect in slowing it down. If the C.I.O. makes such a progressive showing and the A. F. of L. does not, the cause therefore is to be found mainly in the different qualities of their leaderships. And it is safe to add that when the A. F. of L. workers finally get into action they will throw off their present reactionary leadership and will develop another, much more akin to that of the C.I.O., and, hence, more in harmony with their progressive moods of the craft union membership.

The A. F. of L. and the C.I.O. can and must be united. And to accomplish unity is the task of the progressive forces of labor. This means, above all, that the C.I.O. has the responsibility to push the fight for trade union unity, jointly with the A. F. of L. rank and file and the progressive sections of the A. F. of L. leadership (for there are many progressives among A. F. of L. officials). This unity fight should be carried on far more aggressively than in the past. The first steps towards trade union unity at present lead through A. F. of L.-C.I.O. cooperation in the developing elections, in the fight against wage cuts, for the relief and recovery program, for pending labor legislation, etc. The question of trade union unity should be raised

more vigorously throughout the trade union movement—in local unions and central labor council meetings, in state federation and international union conventions. Also, non-proletarian progressives, vitally interested in building the democratic front, should let their voices be heard on the question.

The time is now ripe for a great drive for trade union unity. The whole labor movement should be made to ring with the issue. The unity proposals made by the C.I.O. several months ago were not in vain, although they did not lead immediately to unity. They, at least, took most of the punch out of the violent internecine labor war that the A. F. of L. was then organizing by emphasizing the unifying role of the C.I.O. A new and more determined unity campaign by the C.I.O. can defeat the A. F. of L. reactionaries' present attempts to spread the split into the political field and also put the trade union movement definitely on the way to unity. The mass sentiment for unity rises daily and it will become irresistible if the C.I.O. gives it the necessary leadership. Needless to add, the Communist Party also has a grave responsibility in furthering this great work of working class solidarity and progress. The consolidation of trade union progress to date and the achievement of further progress depend upon the establishment of trade union unity.