

The Workers Committees in Great Britain

By J. T. Murphy

IT is easier to-day to estimate the significance and importance of the Workers' Committee Movement in Britain than at any time since the first uprush of committees which characterised the union movement in the early days of the war period. It has passed through a variety of changes and its latter stages are as important as the first. Then it was a movement wholly in the factories. To-day it is an Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement so far as independent organisation is concerned.

It was the failure of the orthodox labor union leaders to remain true to the interests of the masses that compelled the coming into being of independent leadership and organisation of the union elements in the factories. It was the failure of the same leaders and organisations to tackle the problems of the unemployed which compelled the creation of the Unemployed Workers' Committees. To-day in all the important industrial centres where unemployment is so rife there is a network of committees operating under their own national leaders striving continually to save the unemployed workers from starvation and degradation.

Strange as it may seem neither in the case of the factory committees or the unemployed committees have the masses attached to these organisations fought against the unions in spite of their sometimes violent condemnation of the union leaders. In the Engineers Lock-out of recent date the organised unemployed have played an heroic part, organising mass pickets with the locked out workers, marching into factories, pulling out the scabs and stopping firms from working overtime. They have pursued a policy of utilising whatever means lay to hand to assist in the struggle of the workers NOW, attaching themselves to Trades Councils, Lock-Out Committees, union committees, etc., and using them. To have set out on a campaign to smash the unions would have lost them whatever assistance they have gathered from the unions, and also a large proportion of their own members. This they realised even as the Workers Committees of the war period realised.

There never was much support forthcoming for a separatist policy even during the time when they were most powerful. To start off for the building of new unions when large powerful organisations were already in the field has been recognised by the advanced workers as a fatal policy intensifying the problems of sectionalism

rather than solving them. To make 52 unions into 53 unions is not the way to get One Union for the Industry. Such a policy stands no chance in the trades union movement of this country. And it is because of this fact that the spontaneous movements which rise from time to time in the union movement leave their permanent marks and help in the transformation of the labor organizations to more perfect forms and durable instruments of struggle.

Before the war only a few unions had shop stewards. To-day every union in the engineering and shipbuilding industry have shop stewards and are committed to the formation of workshop committees. The "Shop Stewards and Works Committee Agreement" made between the employers and the unions in 1918 was a big factor in defeating the unofficial Shop Steward and Workers Committees as an independent organization. But it did so only by committing the unions officially to adopt the factory organization



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methods which had been the feature of the unofficial movement. Certainly it took the sting out of the revolutionary movement at the same time, and gave it a new direction, but it committed the unions officially to strive for the control of labor conditions in the factory and to the introduction of new methods of struggle. The unions have now consciously and openly invaded the factories. The question "Who shall control the factories?" has thus become practical politics for the unions. Once it was a theme for the active minority alone. To-day it is in the forefront of the industrial struggle. Witness the Engineers Lock-out and the challenge concerning "managerial functions."

More even than this has been gained. The amalgamation of the unions has received an impetus. Big schemes are afoot and the demand for one union for the Engineering and Shipbuilding industry has become a live issue. This demand has been a theme of the Workers' Committees from their inception. Their attempt to practice the idea in the workshops by forming the factory committees to include *all* the unions represented there, has been a force to be reckoned

with. And to-day it is realised that the one means of saving whatever the unions have gained in their struggle through the years, is to get together at once in the factories and proceed rapidly towards amalgamation.

Equally permanent and durable will be the effect of the Unemployed Workers Committees. When unemployed the differences between the skilled and unskilled workers are swept away by the common factor of hunger. Of what value is it to talk about your skill or your craft to the Boards of Guardians when you are hungry and there are so many more in the same predicament?

This struggle for bread has pulled the unemployed workers together as never before. The many attempts to use their suffering as a weapon to defeat the unions have failed because they have organised and lined up with the unions for common defense.

These are the services which the Workers Committees have rendered to the workers movement as a whole. They have been successful mainly because they have refused to be sectarian, used the existing organisations, sought to mould them to better forms, and give to them a greater purpose.
