

THE WORKERS' DREADNOUGHT

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The Italian Trade Union Movement and The Camera del Lavoro.

The Italian Trade and Industrial Unions were originally started by the Socialist Party. The membership of the Unions is now greater than that of the Party. In Milan there are 1200 members of the Socialist Party and 120 000 members of the Unions.* Nevertheless the Party still retains great influence with the Unions, and it is highly important to notice that in the case of a strike for a political object, it is the Socialist Party which calls the strike.

Though the Italian Parliament sits at Rome, the headquarters of the Italian workers' organisations both political and industrial, are in the industrial city of Milan.

Every working-class centre has its workers' house, called the Camera del Lavoro, and the Milan Camera del Lavoro is the largest of all. It contains 90 offices for the Unions, in which the names of the organised workers are indexed in card files. As far as possible each Union has its own office, but as there are more than 90 Unions, two Unions are in some cases obliged to share a room.

In the Camera del Lavoro building there is a fine theatre which accommodates two thousand people sitting, or ten thousand standing: it is a common thing for the audience to stand at indoor meetings in Italy, in order that more people may be present. The theatre is used as a rule for meetings but at present is monopolised by the actors who are on strike and who have covered the walls of Milan with pictorial posters advertising that fact, and portraying the fat theatrical profiteer exploiting the lean theatrical workers, who proclaim themselves as members of the working class.

Attached to the Camera del Lavoro is a large professional school, where boys and girls may learn the technique of weaving, carpentering, bookbinding, engineering, and all sorts of trades and crafts. In view of the approach of the Workers' Revolution in Italy, it is interesting to learn that the work of providing technical education for the people, which in Britain was first started by public-spirited private individuals and is now undertaken by the Municipality, is in Italy already carried on by the workers' own industrial organisations. The Camera del Lavoro itself provides one-third of the cost of the professional school, the Unions one-third, and the Municipality makes a further grant of one-third. The Camera is assisted in its work by the fact that some

years ago a certain rich man called Lona left a fortune of 30 000 000 lire for the benefit of the workers; for eight years there was a squabble as to the use to which this money should be put. During these years the interest on the money accumulated. Afterwards a Committee was formed for administering the fortune on which the Socialists have always had the preponderating voice. The money is used to assist the industrial movement of the workers in all parts of Italy and to provide professional schools and so on.

During the war the Camera del Lavoro also took to manufacturing and selling on its own account, so that the Italian workers have already had a good deal of experience in the control of industry.

THE GENERAL COUNCIL AND EXECUTIVE OF THE TRADE UNIONS.

The structure of the Italian trade and industrial organisations approximates in some respects to that of the Soviets. It is a structure at once more closely knit and more easily controlled by the rank and file than is that of the British Trade Union movement.

Each Union has of course its own special Executive Committee numbering 7, 9, or 11, according to the will of the Union members.

There is a General Council of the Unions, to which each Union may appoint one delegate for every hundred members, fifty being the minimum membership for securing one delegate. Hitherto the General Council has elected the Executive, which consists of 15 members, but more advanced elements were dissatisfied with this method; therefore at the last election the Executive was directly elected by the whole membership. The result was that the more advanced representatives lost their places and the more reactionary element captured every seat. The reason was that probably, in the main, the reactionaries are the older orators, who are known throughout the country; whereas the younger people, with the newer ideas, are doing the local spade work: and thus being only known locally, they cannot capture a national majority. On the other hand the members of the General Council, who have personal contact with each other, are able to recognise each other's qualities, and when the Executive was elected by the General Council, it was representing a body which was able really to supervise its work. Those who imagine that the Soviet system is not democratic, because it is a system of committees which elect other committees, should bear this in mind.

The Executive Committee of the Italian General Council of Unions elects its own secretary and staff.

Though each Union has its own Executive and manages its own affairs, it is recognised that strikes are liable to affect, not only the trade or industry in which the strikers are employed, but many others beside. Therefore the central body is consulted in the case of important strikes. Sometimes the Executive can decide the matter, but frequently the General Council is summoned. Five General Councils were held in connection with the great strike of the metal workers. We were told that the unofficial strikes, which are so common in Britain, do not take place among the organised workers of Italy. The unorganised workers, however, often have spontaneous strikes; but usually after a few days they apply to the Camera del Lavoro for aid, and thus they become organised.

WORKSHOP COMMITTEES.

During the war an organisation called the Internal Commission was set up to facilitate production under the Committees of Mobilis-

ation. The Internal Commission consisted of workshop committees composed of workers' delegates in the proportion of one delegate per hundred workers, some technicians, and a military president. At first these Committees only discussed matters of factory discipline, but later practical questions of the organisation of the work, supplies of materials, costings, and so on, came before them. The workers' representatives constantly induced these wider discussions and thereby learnt many things. They discovered, for instance, that in the leather industry the wages amounted to only 7 per cent on the cost, and they were soon able to discuss wages with their employers with a knowledge they had never hitherto possessed. Now that the war is over, the Committee on Mobilisation has relaxed its hold on industry, the military president and the technicians have retired from the Internal Commission, but the workshop Committees remain and now carry on negotiations with the employers in conjunction with the Trade Union officials. The Workshop Committees were largely controlling the industry during the war; they have retained as much as possible of their old power, and are waiting to take complete control when the Revolution comes. There is a story quite opposite to that of the British Munitions Tribunals, though the intention of the Italian Government in setting up the Internal Commission was precisely that of the British Government. But whilst the British Trade Unionists were Jingo "Social Patriots," their Italian contemporaries were class war Socialists—in that lies the difference!

Workers in small unorganised trades are sometimes afraid to ask the Camera del Lavoro to assist them, lest they should be dismissed. During the war this fear was accentuated, because the Camera del Lavoro opposed the war. Therefore the Camera del Lavoro, without any application from the workers concerned, brought the conditions in many ill-paid trades before the Committees on Mobilisation and the Internal Commission, and demanded improvements. If these were refused the facts were brought before the workers and they were urged to make the same demands.

The workers in the weaker trades are also assisted by the Camera to form benefit societies for sickness and accident. (As we pointed out in a previous article, Italian Trade and Industrial Unions do not undertake friendly insurance: this is done by Societies specially formed for the purpose. The Trade and Industrial Unions are fighting organisations for improving the status of the worker in the industry.) With the assistance of the Camera del Lavoro, if the worker pays 50 centesimi a day to the Trade Union, and out of that 1 lira 50 centesimi per month is paid to the benefit society, then the worker can get 2 lire a day sick or accident benefit after six months' membership.

Scavengers and other casual workers were long unorganised because of their fluctuating trade. Now each group of workers among the casuals elects a representative, who collects the subscriptions and takes them to the Camera del Lavoro, where the members' names, with particulars regarding their payments, etc., are kept in card files. Anyone can go to the Camera, and, by consulting the file, can see just where he stands and whether his dues have been paid. The collector receives his travelling expenses and a small donation at the end of his term of office and the workers are spared the expense of a treasurer and secretary.

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*In the whole of Italy there are now 1,300,000 Trade Unionists; there were less than 300,000 in December, 1918, as the membership greatly declined during the war. The Socialist Party has 87,000 members in Italy. The "Avanti!" has a circulation of 300,000 daily.

There are 100 centesimi in a lira, which is worth about 9d. in English money.

Italian Trade Unions. Continued from p. 1536

A rival to the Socialist industrial movement represented by the Camera del Lavoro, is the Partito Popolare Italiano, an anti-Socialist organisation assisted by the Church and the bourgeoisie. The influence of this organisation, which was strongest amongst the women and peasants, is waning. Its weakness was clearly manifest when it nominated twelve members for the Internal Commission in Milan and the nominees received but 11 votes, not even all the proposers voting for them. The Camera del Lavoro delegates were all elected.

Recently there occurred a strike of foremen and managers, owing to the pressure of the rising cost of living; 150,000 workers were thrown out of work by this strike, as the employers, being themselves often without the technical knowledge, could not carry on without these officials. In the course of this strike many trade secrets, proving that the country had been exploited by the capitalists, were revealed.

The workers' movement both political and industrial, is more centralised in Italy than in Britain. There appears to be neither the conflict of overlapping organisations, nor the multiplicity of independent unions for closely-allied trades, with which we are familiar.

Thus the workers in all the textile industries,—cotton, wool, and so on,—are in one union; and all the various trades within the industry, including dyeing, are covered by this union. As in Britain, the majority of the textile workers are women. We visited the office of the Textile Union in the Camera del

Lavoro, and found that the officials in charge there were women. We noticed a portrait of Karl Marx on the wall, and were told that all the officials and active members were Socialists.

The women textile workers have not yet secured equal pay with the men. Under an agreement of July 1st last, women weavers get 3 lire a day; men 3.50; apprentices 1.35, and there are similar differences in other branches of the industry. In addition to the daily wage, the workers get a bonus for "caroviveri"—the high cost of living. Under this bonus, the men get 33 centesimi an hour, the women 28, and apprentices between 12 and 15 years get 26 centesimi an hour. The textile workers have recently won the 48-hour week: overtime is paid for at 40 per cent above the ordinary rates.

The highest wage for men in the industry seemed to be Lire 72.39 a week (between 55/- and 57/-) including caroviveri. Rents in Milan are lower than in London; a working-class flat, consisting of two rooms and a kitchen, costs about 7/- a week. Bread is about the same price as in England, milk and fruit rather less, everything else much more costly. Therefore it will be realised that the Italian workers are having a hard struggle to make ends meet. Women silk weavers, who are at present paid Lire 6.24 a day, including caroviveri for a 48-hour week, were recently paid only Lire 2.50 a day. They were on strike for a month to get their present rate.

The Industrial workers find when they are on strike that the soldiers are often hostile to

them, because they believe that unrest among the workers retards their demobilisation. But it is very difficult for the soldiers to express themselves, and propaganda amongst the soldiers is also most difficult, for it is estimated that every fourth soldier in the Italian army is not a soldier at all but a policeman. He is dressed like the other soldiers and they are unable to recognise him as other than they, but he is ready to inform against them should they show any trace of leaning towards the popular cause, and they know that he is beside them, without knowing which is he. The soldier policemen are paid considerably more than the ordinary soldiers.

E. SYLVIA PANKHURST.

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Admission by Silver Collection.