

Lessons From Passaic

By Albert Weisbord

I.

THE Passaic strike has been an important experience for the whole working class. The spotlight of publicity that was generated by the strike has thoroughly exposed the terrible working and living conditions which the industrialists, in spite of their almost fabulous profits, have forced upon the workers in the basic industries of our country. There have also come into full light the huge forces that the working class has to face when it does rebel against those conditions. Many of those who, sitting comfortably in their rockers, gasped as to what Passaic stood for, failed to realize that Passaic is a typical industrial city in America, that Passaic is the kind of city which forms the very foundation of economic life in this country.

The workingclass knows only too well that the concentrated industrial and political power of the mill owners in Passaic, the intense exploitation, the misery and suffering of the workers is repeated everywhere.

And the working class finding such conditions everywhere also realizes that the needs of the workers based on such conditions which have given rise to such a splendid stubborn struggle in Passaic will give rise to other similar and larger struggles elsewhere. The Passaic strike is a symbol not only of the suffering but of the determination of the workers in general, of the twenty-eight million unorganized unskilled workers in this country, of the one million workers in the textile industry especially.

The Passaic strike, now ten months in duration, has shown that the will to organize and to fight still burns fiercely, in spite of betrayal and abandonment by bureaucratic labor officials, in spite of the pessimism and defeatism insidiously injected by those officials into the ranks of the workers.

The time has come, now more than ever before, to organize the unorganized into powerful unions embracing all the workers of a given industry. During the last decade or so forces have entered into American life which especially favor the organization of the unorganized and the creation of the united front of labor in its daily struggles against the united front of the imperialist-capitalists.

Let us examine these new forces for a moment and see their effects. In the first place we find, due to the stoppage of immigration during the war and its restriction afterwards, that the workers have had an opportunity to settle down and become a more homogeneous united mass. The children brought over here from abroad by these foreign-born workers have been taught in American schools. They all speak and write English. They have American tastes and standards. They are now working in the mills. They have become living

links that bind all the workers closer together into a solid mass.

It is no accident that in Passaic the young workers took an active leading role. It is no accident that the racial and religious prejudices which the bosses tried to disseminate among the workers absolutely failed to take root. It is significant that the only language spoken during a large part of the strike was English.

Further, the homogeneity of the workingclass in America was helped by the forces generated by the World War and its aftermath. The workers who came back from the trenches, came back a disillusioned, disciplined, hardened, aggressive lot, who had faced bullets in fighting Kaiserism abroad and were no longer afraid of clubs in fighting Kaiserism here.

In Passaic, for example, it was but natural that when the police began their clubbing that the returned soldiers, now textile strikers, should don their old army uniforms and put on their steel trench helmets. Against the tear bombs of the bosses, how natural the gas masks of the workers.

The war and the after-period also produced forces that tended to fuse all crafts into a common standardized denominator, simple labor, and to level the ranks of skilled and unskilled into one class. During the war the price of unskilled labor rose faster than the wages which skilled workers were receiving. After the war with the ever new machinery introduced, standardizing products and reducing skill, with speeding-up the order of the day, with ultra-powerful employers imposing wage cuts and worsened conditions, many skilled workers found themselves with their privileges and security gone, thrown into the ranks of the unskilled.

Such conditions make for industrial unionism, and spell doom to the old craft unions. In Passaic we see spinners and loom-fixers fighting side by side with unskilled side tenders and dyers and actually leading the way, in some respects, for common action.

The Proletarian Revolution in the Soviet Union is another new force making the working class riper for action. The reverberations of the revolution have made themselves felt among the ranks of the workers, especially the unskilled, foreign-born workers, in every industry in this country. There is a confidence, a steadiness among the workers, a deep feeling of power that could come only from seeing and feeling that part of their class had seized the reins of power over one-sixth of the globe and was leading the world towards emancipation.

In spite of these favorable conditions, however, the working class, under the leadership of the reactionary bureaucratic labor officialdom found itself instead of fighting, fawning, instead of becoming organized, becoming disorganized. The employers were allowed to take



Men, Women and Children Are Trampled Down in Passaic.

the offensive again and again. Unions smashed in 1919, "hunger-cure" unemployment in 1920-1921, wage cuts in 1922, these were the signs of the times. With the spirited resistance of the workers in 1922 the employers were forced back in some cases. More clever devices were tried. Collaboration with the trade union officials through "B. & O." plans, new "efficiency" systems, Company Unions, a whole series of tricks was developed to destroy the resistance of the workers. Having thus prepared the way, the bosses launched their next offensive in 1924.

This time the campaign was conducted far more skillfully than in 1922. Starting first in the textile industry, particularly in the cotton mills of New England, the bosses began to cut wages 10 per cent. Not all the workers of a mill had wages cut at the same time, but

cautiously mill by mill, department by department, city by city, the drive proceeded. By the spring of 1924, all of the workers in the cotton mills had had their pay reduced. The same thing started in the woolen and silk mills while a drive to speed up the workers began in the cotton mills. In some places as much as one-third of the working force was permanently displaced, two workers doing what three used to do before. By the end of 1925, this second drive had been successfully accomplished in the textile mills of New England and the campaign moved south to New Jersey and the middle Atlantic States.

Not satisfied with this, the mill owners went further. They started to lengthen the hour-week. A tremendous lobby killed the bill put forth in Albany, New York establishing a forty-eight hour week for women. In Boston



On the Picket Line in Passaic

a great agitation has started for the repeal of the forty-eight hour law there. The drive to push down the standards of the workers was now in full swing.

But the situation had become intolerable. If the A. F. of L. officials would not act, there would spring forth leaders from the ranks of the workers themselves who would give battle to their masters. The most militant of these workers, the Communists, had already analyzed the situation correctly. Basing itself on the needs of the workers, the Workers (Communist) Party had incessantly raised the slogan "Organize the Unorganized," and the unity of labor in its struggle against the employers.

It was therefore, quite natural that when in Passaic the textile mill owners cut wages of workers already on the starvation line, that it would be the workers in the Workers (Communist) Party that should lead the movement of resistance and actually demonstrate the Workers (Communist) Party could carry out in battle those slogans it had raised that best expressed the needs of the workers.

II.

The conduct of the Passaic strike itself has been an important addition to the collective experience of the working class. The strike leadership, because it was Communist, having no interests separate from those of the workers, had two major principles which it strictly adhered to during the strike: one was to unify and connect all sections of workers together, to have them move in disciplined solid formation; and two, to awaken into

consciousness all strata of the workers, to train the workers to know their enemies and how to overcome them.

During the strike it became again increasingly clear how powerful the mill owners were. The workers began to see that not only the mills but the government belonged to the owners. The brutal and unprovoked police clubbings; the stabbing and shooting down of strikers; the invasion of hundreds of armed deputies into the strike area; the illegal arrests and seizures, the torturing of prisoners, the irregular trials, the excessively high bail and outrageously heavy fines and sentences imposed; the evictions and injunctions; the closing down of meeting places for the workers and the abolition of civil liberty in the strike area; the strike-breaking efforts of the local state and national governmental officials; all these things proved so clearly to the workers that the whole power of the state was ranged against them to crush them. The role of the government as strike-breaker, the role of the state as an instrument of force employed by the bosses who were beyond the law, to keep the workers in subjection became thoroughly exposed.

All sections of the workers were awakened. Through mass meetings, language meetings, concerts, leaflets, strike paper, district meetings, songs, games, and through the actual experiences of the struggle many of the illusions and prejudices in the minds of the workers before the strike disappeared. Special meetings were called for the women, their special problems discussed and special tasks assigned to them. It is the women who are the most enslaved. It is the women who have the most to gain through organization and struggle. These women became the most active and militant strikers, the best enthusiasts of all.

The same good job was done with the several hundred Negroes that came out. They proved to be fine strikers and unionists.

Nor were the young workers forgotten. The American Federation of Labor officials generally sneer at the youth. The young workers are not even taken into the unions at all, or are grossly discriminated against. But it is the youth who are starved most in the capitalist system. A real leadership would see that the energy and ability to learn on the part of the young workers make them the very best union material. In Passaic every attention was given the youth. The union took the position that with the young workers won over, a union would have to be formed some time in Passaic.

Even the children were mobilized for the struggle. The children were formed into special clubs and given special attention. In many ways the children were invaluable. They would ferret out where scabs lived and picket their homes. And many a scab quit work because his child came home with a black eye after a fight in school. The class struggle entered the schools. The children demanded to know why the schools did not open up free lunch rooms for the strikers' children. At every opportunity the lies spread in the schools about the strike and the union were fought against and the truth told by the children of the strikers.

It was this intense inner solidarity and unity that enabled the strikers to smash the company union

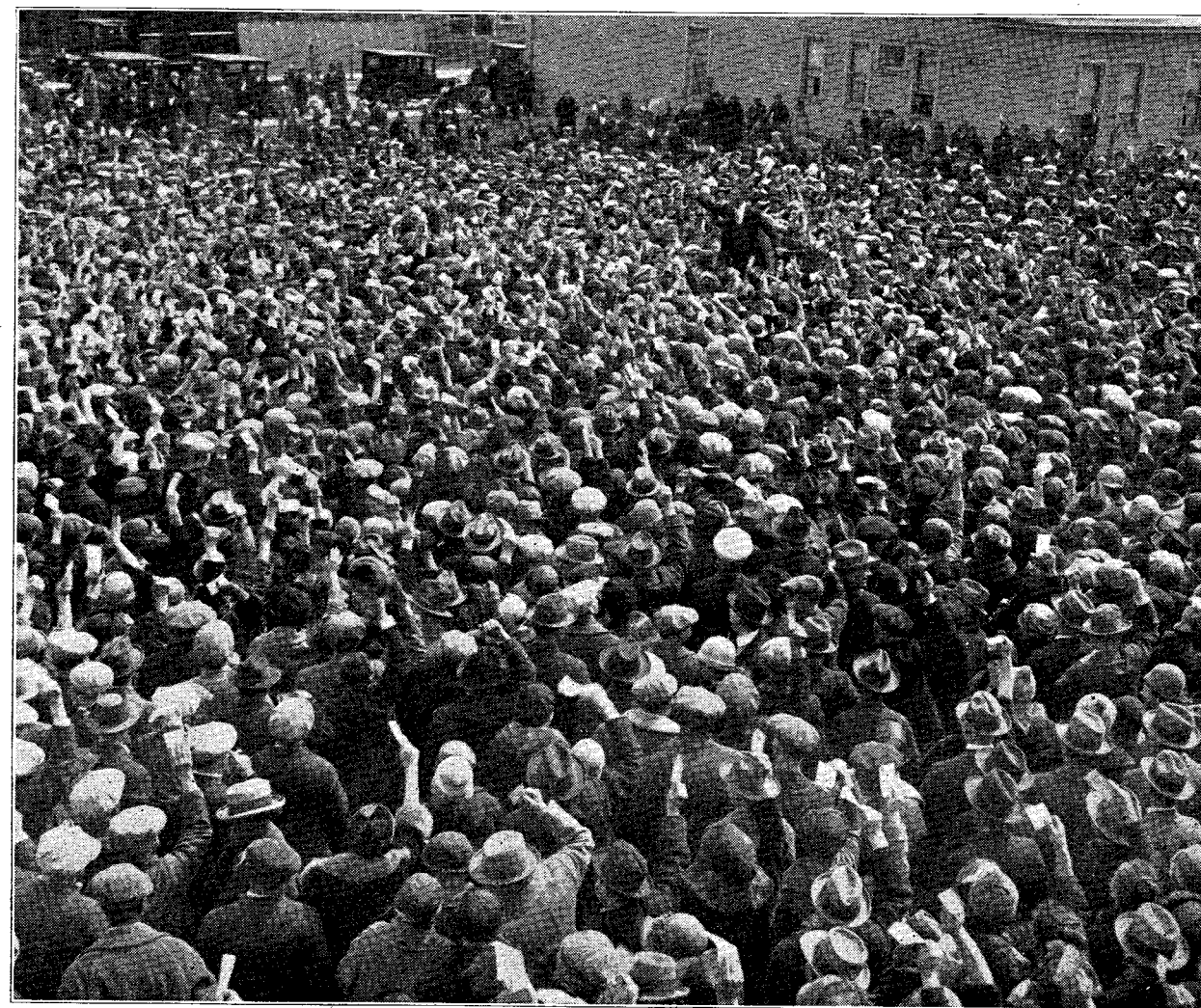
schemes of the mill owners and day after day kept up their morale. This inner unity showed itself in the mass demonstrations, the mass marches, the mass picketing that took place in Passaic. It showed itself in the self-obedience that the strikers gave to their elected delegates. It showed itself in the stubbornness of the battle.

Not only inner unity was developed by the Communist leadership, but outer unity also. Again and again efforts were made by the strikers to broaden the struggle and to unite with ever larger and larger masses. The Passaic strike has demonstrated that far from being disruptors of unions the Communists can build unions and are the only ones that fight for the unity of labor.

First, the strike leadership addressed Mr. Green, President of the American Federation of Labor, asking for support in the strike and stating that the Passaic strikers earnestly desired unity in the textile industry and would do all in their power to join the A. F. of L.

Mr. Green evaded this letter. In the meantime the Strike Committee had made an offer to the Associated Silk Workers' Union in Paterson to join hands in an organization drive among the dye workers of Paterson. This too was put off. Again efforts were made to get the Federated Textile Unions, a group of five unions, loosely banded together, to begin a drive to organize the unorganized and fight wage cuts. But all to no avail.

While these negotiations were going on the whole labor world was witnessing the scene where 16,000 textile workers, battling against tremendous odds and successfully holding their own under Communist leadership, were being rebuffed by the officials of that very organization that should have organized them long ago and at that very date should have been fighting their battles. Everyone realized that the fight of the Passaic strikers was the fight of all labor. Everyone realized that the Passaic strike had meant the definite checking of wage cuts and a body blow to company unionism.



15,000 Passaic Strikers Give Weisbord Vote of Confidence.

More and more, the honest trade unionists began to question why it was that the American Federation of Labor would not take in the Passaic textile workers. It seemed that only the Communists could lead the workers in struggle.

It was when the American Federation of Labor officialdom went further and objectively joined forces with the bitterest enemies of labor in attacking the strikers, that these questions became challenges to the reactionary officialdom. Such organs as the Seattle Union Record and the Labor Age, actually took up arms against the American Federation of Labor reactionary machine. Throughout the country the Passaic Relief Conferences made up of trade unionists—another achievement for the unity of labor—began a vigorous attack against the labor bureaucracy.

The situation had become a scandal. Even liberals and conservatives took a hand to point out that Mr. Green could not afford to be put in the position where he stood against taking workers into the American Federation of Labor. Under this growing pressure, the American Federation of Labor officials had to yield. They were compelled to accept the strikers.

The Passaic strike has exposed the reactionary officials. It has shown that not the Communists but the Greens and his crew stand against giving battle to the

bosses. The Workers (Communist) Party has shown that only the Communists stand for the organization of the unorganized, for amalgamation, for unity. Even when the American Federation of Labor officials made their strike-breaking condition, namely that before they would take over the strike, Weisbord and the other Communist leaders had to go, the Communist Party showed that it had no narrow selfish interests to serve, that it had no interests separate and apart from those of the workers and having forced the federation officials to fight and having built up a strong union, could withdraw the strike leader.

The Workers (Communist) Party can say to the Greens and others: "You have expelled Communists before. You expel Weisbord now. You try in all your power to split the unions. But we shall build the unions in spite of you. You may expel one, you may expel two, but you cannot expel the Communist Party. In Passaic we have built so well, you cannot destroy the union or betray the strike. Throughout the country these expulsions will bring your doom and show more than ever to the workers, that only the Communists can lead them."

It is now up to the Federation officials in Passaic. If they want to, they can settle the strike in a satisfactory manner. Let us see to it that they do.