



ALBERT WEISBORD SPEAKING TO THRONG OF STRIKERS IN NEW BEDFORD

Peculiar Sidelights On New Bedford

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TODAY, after almost four months of struggle, the left wing union in New Bedford, the New Bedford Textile Workers Union, affiliated with the National Textile Mill Committees, has a real achievement to its credit. In the face of great obstacles it has been able to mobilize the mass of unorganized workers and successfully to lead them in action against the powerful mill owners of that important textile center.

It is worth while to study the difficulties peculiar to the New Bedford strike which had to be overcome. These difficulties could be classified under the following headings:

1. Geographic isolation.
2. Composition of the working class.
3. Anti-working class trends and enemies within the ranks of the workers.

First. Geographic isolation. New Bedford is situated far off the main stream of travel, in the southern part of Massachusetts, facing the ocean, 157

miles south of Boston, 30 miles east of Providence and 240 miles north and east of New York City. Being so far from any large center, New Bedford has been rather stagnant, especially during the past years, and its workers have been isolated from the struggles that have taken place elsewhere. This geographical isolation has added many difficulties to effective organization and strike work. It is difficult to obtain speakers, difficult to get adequate publicity, etc.

Again, the layout of the city itself adds burdens to the work. The city is long and narrow, approximately 11 miles long and generally but 2 miles wide. Along this 11 miles of waterfront the cotton mills stretch except for an area in the center which is used for general business purposes. Thus the city is like a large dumbbell in form, with the workers clustered around the mills in the north and south parts of the city. This results practically in there being two cities,

one north and the other south. Each part has been independent of the other and with the fare 25 cents from one end of the city to the other and return, the workers of each section have remained isolated and stagnant each from the other.

A Decentralized Town

This situation made it difficult for the union to obtain general headquarters easily accessible to all the workers. At the same time the employers have utilized this geographical division to attempt to divide the workers of the north from those of the south and cause misunderstandings between them. Again because of this difficulty of coordination, within the ranks of the workers themselves there appeared a tendency for a time to form two strike committees and two policies instead of one.

Second. Composition of the working class. The workingclass in New Bedford is composed of those foreign-born groups which up to now have seldom if ever been brought into large struggles. Nor did they have general militant strike or union traditions. The main bulk of strikers are made up of French-Canadians, Portuguese, and English with smaller groups Poles and Greeks. None of these racial groups (with the exception of the Poles) had been involved in the large and bitter struggles that have recently taken place in America elsewhere, such as the mining textile and needle trades struggles. None of these groups had been accustomed before to an industrialized environment (with the exception of the English) and principles of unionism had been quite foreign to them.

The French-Canadians coming from the farm lands and even the back woods of Canada still retained to some measure the characteristics of people working in those places; self-reliance, individualism, penuriousness, complete lack of class-consciousness and ignorance of the elements of unionism were the main characteristics offering difficulties to the organizers of this section of the working class.

The Portuguese offered other difficulties. These Portuguese workers came not only from the mainland of Portugal but from the many little islands off the coast of Africa owned by Portugal. Each small island had its own customs, perhaps its own dialect, and its own patriotism and family ties. These peculiarities have been brought over to America. Some of the groups are Negroid, some not. The result was that many of the Portuguese workers had a "family" and "island" loyalty which tended to divide them and offered fertile field for friction.

Differing from the above groups both in having been organized and in belonging to the more skilled "upper" strata of the workers were the English. Most of these workers came from Lancashire, England,

and from childhood on had been brought up in a union and even socialistic environment. But American capitalism had corrupted them, given them better jobs and special privileges and had thus eaten the heart out of them. Their union organization was led by a set of reactionary tools of the employers who had divided them by craft lines from each other and entirely from the rest of the workers. Class collaboration had been the road on which they had plodded for many years. They belonged to the Masons, or the Elks, or the Moose, or the Knights or some such order which further increased their "exclusiveness".

Third. Anti-working class trends and enemies within the ranks of the workers. Militant unionism had to face in sharpened form the following obstacles and enemies.

1. The individualism prevalent among the backward hitherto unindustrialized sections of the workers.
2. Anarchistic tendencies obtained abroad and developed here.
3. Strong syndicalist traditions in some quarters.
4. The attack of the reactionary officials of the American Federation of Labor who have felt the ground slipping under their feet.
5. The virulent attitude of the Socialist Party reformists. These latter have definitely injected themselves into the strike, lending their "specialized" and "expert" knowledge (specialized and expert in methods calculated to defeat militants and revolutionists) to the reactionary officials. Every effort has been made to isolate the real fighters in New Bedford from the rest of the labor movement, to cut off relief and defence and to crush the militant new union.

However in spite of these special and extra-heavy difficulties the new union has forged ahead surmounting everything and has not only successfully defended itself but has definitely taken the offensive. It has the leadership in the strike field. It has more members organized. It has rallied the vacillating elements around it. It has extended the demands of the workers. And finally, it is making every effort to extend the strike inside New Bedford and in Fall River.

In Fall River the National Office of the Textile Mill Committees has opened up an office and sent in organizers Reid and Hegelias to extend the strike and to fight wage cuts. Already three magnificent meetings have been held and the terror of the police definitely broken. Hundreds of workers have now joined the Textile Mill Committees of Fall River. Soon, if all goes well, new reserves will be thrown into the fight, fresh reserves from Fall River that will carry the battle forward to victory!