

Needle Trades Bosses Amalgamate While Unions Disintegrate

By ROSE WORTIS.

In the "Women's Wear" of Friday, November the 4th, there appeared a statement about the organization of a new Association of Women's Apparel Industries of America. The statement runs in part as follows:

"The objects to be accomplished include 'the joining together for the purpose of mutual benefit for those engaged in the manufacture or wholesale distribution of women's, misses' and children's wear and kindred lines, and those engaged in the manufacture or wholesale distribution of materials that go to produce and develop the industries mentioned in the United States.'"

"It has been repeatedly pointed out that the commonality of interests of all ready-to-wear concerns demanded a powerful, unified organization to ably direct activities."

The statement further goes on to say that:

"The new organization has already arranged an affiliation with other leading organizations in the women's ready-to-wear market, notably the United Women's Wear League of America and its affiliated organizations, the Eastern Millinery Association and its units, the Associated Fur Manufacturers and the Associated Dress Industries of America."

"The new association will have as its chief objects the betterment of internal trade conditions and the achievement of closer accord between wholesalers and retailers, and wholesalers and their sources of supply."

"It will now be possible for the Women's apparel industries to present a united front in the furtherance of their common goal."

Association to Fight Workers.

While this association is seemingly organized to take care of the purely business end of the employers' interests, there is no doubt that the broad aim—of unifying and protecting the interests of the manufacturers engaged in the various branches of the industries—will include mutual aid and protection in the event of labor trouble. The organization of this new association shows that the employers are alive to the industrial developments. It shows that they recognize centralization as the best means of protecting their interests in all fields. The needle trade industry is continuously growing in importance in spite of the occasional seasonal slumps. The employers recognize that by solidifying their forces, by establishing a centralized machinery on a scientific basis, their position in relation to other factors in the industry will be strengthened to the great advantage of their business growth.

The association thus far is limited to women's apparel industries, but the close connection and similarity of problems between the women's and the men's clothing industries will undoubtedly lead to the extension of this association to include the employers of the men's garment industry.

The employers of the various

branches of the industry have at all times been conscious of their common interests and during critical periods have come to one another's assistance both financially and morally. A striking illustration was the attitude of the Industrial Council during the Furriers' strike of 1926, when they refused to permit their employees, to work an extra half day during the height of the season (which under ordinary circumstances they would have gladly agreed to) simply because the money was to be contributed to the support of the fur strikers. However, the organizational separation was an obstacle to more active cooperation, with the result that today this difficulty has been obviated by the formation of this new association. Thus we see employers of the needle industries, taking full cognizance of their common needs by joining their forces in "a united front in the furtherance of their common goal."

What of the Unions.

How are the unions equipped to meet the new developments in the industry? How will the needle trade unions face the united front of the bosses? How will the officials of the needle trade unions, who are opposed to amalgamation of the needle trades and have persecuted all the exponents of amalgamation, meet this new offensive of the bosses? What is the situation in the needle trade unions today?

The Cloak & Dressmakers' Union.

The Cloak & Dressmakers' Union is lying prostrate, without a vestige of its former strength. The jobbing-contracting system, which had for years been the source of all evils, has received such impetus by the internal struggle that daily the more legitimate firms are disbanding their plants and are becoming jobbers. Union conditions, for which the cloak and dressmakers have bled for many years, are completely wiped out. The week work system, which was established in the cloak industry after a long and bitter struggle, has been abolished and piece work, at rates even lower than those prevailing in 1910, re-established. The 40-hour week, one of the greatest achievements of the needle trade unions, is but a memory of the past. The ten and twelve hour day and the seven day week is a common practice in the industry.

Corruption and Demoralization.

Not a trace is left of the dignity and self respect achieved by the workers thru the organization of their union. The cloak and dressmaker today is an abject slave of his employer and is subjected to the speed-up system and to humiliating conditions.

The Cloak & Dressmakers' Union, which was the proud achievement of thousands of men and women, is shattered into fragments, its prestige undermined, its morale broken. The best union workers, employed by their respective firms for many years, are discharged by order of the highest officers of the International.

Workers are sent to scab against each other and are given police pro-

tection at the expense of the International. Gangsters openly declare in court that they have been hired by the Sigman machine to make murderous attacks on workers.

Hundreds of thousands of dollars from union trust funds are squandered. Injunctions are used by the officialdom in its struggle against the membership. Workers are imprisoned for long terms thru the provocations of men who call themselves union leaders. The expressed wishes of the workers are openly defied and the union brought to shame by a clique of bureaucrats. Sigman, a wealthy property owner, surrounded by elements of the lowest type, poses as the spokesman of the workers and usurps the right to rule the destinies of the thousands of cloak and dressmakers.

The Furriers' Union.

Similar is the situation in the Fur Workers' International. The monumental achievements of the Furriers' Union during the left wing administration, which brought that organization to the forefront of the needle trade unions as an example of militancy, class-consciousness and virility, have been completely destroyed.

The successful efforts of the workers under the left wing administration, which have rooted out gangsterism and corruption and have raised the furriers from the status of slaves of both the employers and the corrupt union clique to the dignity of class-conscious workers fighting militantly for a greater share of the product of their labor: the glaring victory of the 40-hour week; the elimination of sub-contracting and the speed-up system; the average 25 per cent wage increase, etc.; all this has been shattered, destroyed, by the hand of an unscrupulous clique under the direction of Woll and McGrady of the A. F. of L.

Conditions at Low Level.

The furriers, who but a short time ago held their heads erect, conscious of their powerful union ready to back them in their justified demands, are once more under the iron heel of the fur manufacturer, aided by the old clique which is again becoming entrenched in the Fur Workers' International.

Sweat-shop conditions, contracting and sub-contracting, wholesale discharge of workers, graft and corruption have once more come to life, threatening the very existence of the Furriers' Union. Within a short period of a few months the devastating hand of the Wolls and the McGradys has nullified the gains of the 1926 strike and broken the backbone of the Furriers' Union.

The Amalgamated.

Equally disastrous is the situation in the Amalgamated. Even tho no open war, such as exists in the Furriers and in the I. L. G. W. U., was practiced by the bureaucracy of the Amalgamated, it has, nevertheless, thru cunning and treachery expelled many of the most militant workers from the Union and from the shops, and has instituted an iron dictatorship maintained with the aid of strong-arm men — a dictatorship which is brutally crushing every at-

tempt of the workers to revolt against their miserable conditions.

Shamelessly, the leaders of the Amalgamated are selling out the interests of the workers to the employers and are advocating the individual standard of production, which will eliminate the most basic union conditions in the shops. Without any sign of resistance, and even with the tacit consent of the officials of the Amalgamated, the employers are reorganizing their shops and throwing out all such workers who insist on union standards, regardless of whether they are rights or lefts.

The workers of the Amalgamated are paying dearly for the treachery of their leaders during the cloakmakers' strike, for the support given by Beckerman and his gang to the bureaucracy of the I. L. G. W. U. and the Furriers, the Sigmans, Wolls and McGradys in their efforts to convert the militant needle trade unions into "company unions" ruled by their clique.

The Cap Makers.

This break-down of union conditions in the more important branches of the needle industries is having its effect on all other branches and today we find a situation in the Cap Makers' Union where President Zaritzky and his supporters are ready to give up the 40-hour week, the establishment of which came as the result of the victory of the furriers. Zaritzky is not only ready to give up the 40-hour week without a sign of resistance, but is even willing to give up the week-work system, prevailing in the industry for many years, and substitute piece work in its stead.

Same Right Wing Methods.

Zaritzky's manoeuvres in the Union today are typical of the methods employed by the trade union bureaucracy in answer to the offensive of the employers and the demands of the workers for an aggressive policy. Instead of adopting the policy of fighting the jobbers and organizing the out-of-town shops that have migrated from the main centers, as proposed by the left wing, Zaritzky advises granting the employers concessions that would reduce the standards of the New York workers to the level of the out-of-town shops.

Unions Weakened—Bosses Strengthened.

Thus we see conditions where the unions have been weakened and disorganized, union standards undermined, the jobbing-contracting system becoming more widespread, the open shop becoming ever more menacing, the problem of the out-of-town shop more pressing, the sweat shop and speed-up system once more coming into existence, and the ranks of the workers disunited, their energy and enthusiasm dissipated in internal strife. This is the deplorable situation we find in the needle trade unions at a time when the employers' associations are strengthening their ranks and solidifying their forces.

Right Wing Bankruptcy Proved.

In the course of the past few years the bureaucracy of the needle trades has demonstrated its bankruptcy. It has demonstrated its inability to lead and guide the workers in their strug-

gles. It has no vision, no program for meeting the pressing problems of the workers. In this blind alley the decadent bureaucrats, in an effort to maintain their hold on the unions, are erecting ever greater barriers against united action of all the needle trade workers. They are divided and subdivided into various cliques. Their policy is not dictated by the needs of the workers, not by the developments of the industry, but by their clique interests.

Make Common Cause Against Masses

There is one danger, however, which is recognized by all of them, a danger which to them is more real and more menacing than the attacks of the employers; that is the rising revolt of the workers against their further domination in the unions. To obviate this danger, they have found common ground in expulsions and suppression of the workers discontented with their bankrupt policies of submission to the employers. To accomplish this, they have mobilized all their resources and have been carrying on a war of destruction in the needle trade unions for the past few years.

Right Wing Replies with Reaction

The demands of the workers for amalgamation of all the unions in the needle trades to meet the united front of the bosses are answered with expulsions and persecutions. The demand for organization of the unorganized workers, a task which can only be successfully accomplished thru the unification of all the branches of the industry, is met by concessions to the bosses at the expense of the workers. The demand for rank and file control of the unions, for democracy in the administration of union affairs is met with police, injunctions and imprisonment of workers.

Left Wing Leadership the Solution.

The developments of the past few years have been an object lesson to the workers in the needle trades, as well as to the labor movement in general. The brief experiences of the furriers and the cloak and dressmakers with the left wing administrations have shown the workers a way out of their difficulties. It has shown them that only the progressives have a program for strengthening the unions and command forces capable of gaining improvements for the workers. These brief experiences, more than any amount of propaganda, have made possible the determined struggles of these workers during the past year against the combined forces of reaction in the attack on their unions.

Forge Weapons in Struggle

The workers in the needle trades are living thru a period of great stress and agony, but in the course of these struggles they are forging the weapons that will enable them to reconstruct their unions on a sound basis where craft unionism, autocracy and a policy of class collaboration will be substituted by amalgamation, democracy and a militant struggle against employers. Only in unity of action against the united front of the bosses lies the salvation of the needle trade workers. The struggle must go on and will go on until this is accomplished.