

MENACE OF PIECE WORK

By ROSE WORTIS

For several months the General Executive Board of the International and their supporters in the various locals have organized a systematic campaign of agitation for official re-establishment of piece work in the cloak industry. Afraid of the widespread opposition on the part of the workers

toward the elimination of week work, this campaign has been carried through in a carefully planned manner so as to create the impression that the demand for piece work comes from the ranks of the cloakmakers and that the General Executive Board is simply yielding to the pressure of the workers.

In this discussion there were numerous attempts on the part of the supporters of the International machine to bring the question of piece work before the cloakmakers as a remedy for the present evils in the trade. In order to put their point across they have utilized many arguments which are not entirely unknown to the needle trades workers.

Tricked Into Piece Work.

Some years ago, when the officials of the Amalgamated made a deal with the bosses for the abolition of week work, they proclaimed this as a victory for the workers. "Piece work will bring back the bundles to New York"—"Piece work will do away with the competition"—"Piece work will solve all the evils from which the men's clothing workers are suffering." Many of the workers, oppressed by their miserable conditions, were impressed by this poisonous agitation. Today the men's clothing trade is on a piece work basis and the conditions of the workers are much worse than ever before.

Wages Drop.

The figures of the State Labor Department for 1932 show a decrease in the earnings of the men's clothing workers from \$36.52 in 1928 to \$34.34 in 1932 in New York City. From \$26.56 to \$18.02 for men in the remainder of the state. These figures are based on reports from the most reliable establishments. When applied to industry as a whole the average will be reduced to a much lower level. The contracting system has multiplied tenfold. Bundles continue to be cut in New York and sent to the out-of-town sweatshops which have the blessing of the Hillman union label, while thousands of New York workers are idle. The men's clothing workers are working for starvation wages under the most terrific speed-up during the few weeks of the season. Due to the speed-up, unemployment assumes an even greater mass character and thousands of workers cannot secure any employment whatsoever even during the height of the season. These are the results of the blessed piece work system in the men's clothing trade.

How will this change in the system of work from week to piece work affect the conditions of the cloakmakers?

Cloakmakers Always Fought Piece Work.

In arguing for the re-establishment of piece work many of the henchmen of the A. F. of L. machine make reference to the time when the cloakmakers worked under piece work and earned a decent livelihood. They forget to state that even during that period of comparative prosperity, when capitalism, especially in the United States, was on the upgrade, piece work was so detestable to the cloakmakers that they forced the employers to grant them week work with the threat of a strike.

We cannot compare the conditions of piece work in 1919 to 1933. During those days the cloak trade was a highly skilled trade with well estab-

lished firms. When a cloakmaker began to work on a certain style of garment in the beginning of the season there was very little variation in style. Today the style varies in almost every other garment. Today prices for the garments in the cloak trade have been standardized despite the variety in style. Cloaks today are sold at standard prices, which means also standard prices for labor, irrespective of the amount of work.

Dress Shops Are Sweatshops.

A concrete example of the menace of piece work may be seen in the dress industry. The dress industry, just like the cloak industry, is becoming more standardized as far as prices are concerned, even though

the variety of styles today is much greater than it was in the past. What do the dressmakers face in the shops today under piece work? Piece work at flat prices. After a strike or a stoppage the workers succeed in getting an increase of 5c, 10c or 15c on the garment. But this increase is nullified almost immediately by a change in the style of a garment which requires more work. As a result of this piece work system the dress industry has been reduced to one of the worst sweatshop industries. The earnings of the dressmakers are lower today in many cases than even those of the workers of the underwear trade, where week-work still prevails to some extent. Under the system of piece work the wage-cuts are carried through so skillfully that very often they escape the notice of the workers.

Piece Work Means Speed-Up, Wage-Cuts.

The establishment of piece work in the cloak industry at the present time will only mean increased speed-up and lower wages for the cloakmakers. The cloakmakers, just like the dressmakers, will have to contend with the flat prices, which means flat starvation.

The cloakmakers must reject this proposal of the officialdom of the International for the re-introduction of piece work in the cloak trade, for which the bureaucrats have been preparing the ground for years by unofficially sanctioning piece work in the vast majority of the shops. The cloakmakers must learn from the bitter experiences of the men's clothing workers and dressmakers. In the past they have been able to do away with the piece work system through their organized struggle against the bosses. The week work system in the cloak trade can be enforced through the organized might of the workers, under the leadership of a union of the workers, ready to fight in defense of the workers' interests.

A. F. of L. Maneuvers for Bosses

The attempt of the General Executive Board to smuggle in piece work under a fake referendum must be rejected by the mass of the cloakmakers. Their proposal of a referendum on piece work is an encouragement to the bosses to press their demand and exposes the maneuvers of the International with the bosses for piece work.

The success of the furriers in stopping piece work, which was fast being introduced into the fur industry under the rule of the Kaufmans, Stetsky and McGrady, proves that the needle trades workers through their organized power can maintain the gains won in the past struggles.

A United Front for a Strike for Week Work.

The Industrial Union calls on the cloakmakers to build one mighty united front in preparation for a real strike for week work. A successful struggle of the cloakmakers will not only raise the standards of the workers in the cloak trade, but will sound the signal for the tens of thousands of dressmakers to rise in mass revolt against piece work, speed-up and sweatshop conditions. The cloakmakers, through their organized might, can and will defeat the new menace of piece work. In this struggle the cloakmakers will have the full support of all needle trades workers and all other militant workers.

A.F.L. UNION JOINS METAL INDUSTRY WORKERS' UNION

NEW YORK.—The Sewing Machinists who nine months ago organized themselves into the Sewing Machinists and Power Table Cutters Union and affiliated with the A. F. of L. have decided to break with the A. F. of L. and affiliate with the Steel and Metal Workers Industrial Union.

The decision of the members came as a result of bitter experiences in which the leadership of the International Association of Machinists did nothing to gain better conditions for them.

The workers are now preparing to struggle for shorter hours, higher wages and union control of the shops.

Win All Demands in Metal Workers' Strike In Long Island City

LONG ISLAND CITY.—Ten workers of the American Brass and Steel Co. at 35 Wilbur Ave., Long Island City, won their day and a half strike, which was led by the Steel and Metal Workers' Industrial Union, winning all their demands.

They won (1) wage increases of 15 per cent to 25 per cent, (2) time and a half for overtime, (3) recognition of the shop committee elected by the workers, (4) no lay-offs, division of the work. Following the settlement, the workers unanimously decided to join the Steel and Metal Workers' Industrial Union.

Taub To Speak Tonite At Scottsboro Meet;

There will be one meeting at 22 West 114th St. at 8 p.m. and one at 103 West 135th St. at the same time. Admission will be free.

A mass meeting has been called tonight by the National Scottsboro Action Committee for the Randall Memorial Church at 63 West 137th St., opposite the Harlem Hospital. Speakers will be the Rev. Bishop of St. Phillips, Allan Taub, I.L.D. lawyer, and William Fitzgerald of the Harlem I.L.D. This meeting will launch the organization of a Harlem-wide Conference July 9 for the immediate release of the Scottsboro boys.