

New York's AFL In the War Front

By Rose Wortis

(Article II)

The question of labor unity did not receive adequate attention in the discussion at the New York State Federation of Labor Convention, despite the more than 30 resolutions on it and many delegates from upstate communities such as Jamestown, the Capital District, Syracuse, Elmira and Buffalo, the convention city, where CIO and AFL unions are cooperating with each other in united victory councils and joint election committees.

(In Buffalo, two candidates—AFL and CIO—are running for Councilman on the Democratic and ALP tickets).

For the first time since the formation of the CIO, a CIO telegram of greeting was read to the AFL State convention and warmly applauded. In view of all this, it was to be expected that there would be much constructive discussion on the importance of Labor Unity. Sensing this situation, the Resolutions Committee, consisting in the main of conservative hand-picked delegates, delayed its report until the final hours of the convention in order to prevent discussion. They combined all resolutions on Labor Unity, International Unity and brought in a report endorsing the intent of the following resolution introduced by the Jamestown Central Labor Body, which lays the basis for CIO-AFL united action:

"That this convention go on record for the immediate establishment of the necessary working together of all labor on a state-wide, national and international scale, in legislation politics and all other ways vital to all-out victory behind the leadership of President Roosevelt."

This resolution was declared adopted before the delegates had an opportunity even to fully grasp the various issues combined in the report of the Committee. Thus, the important question of international labor unity, so basic to the more effective prosecution of the war and to the solution of labor's problems in the post-war period, went by almost unnoticed at the Convention.

POST-WAR PROBLEMS

Much attention was given at the Convention to post-war problems, including the adoption by the Convention of an extensive program for education and training, endorsement of the Murray-Danahy Bill, the President's proposals on post-war problems of demobilized soldiers, etc. There is great concern and a strong feeling of insecurity as to the future amongst a large number of AFL workers; particularly is this true amongst the older workers who had gone through the experience of the last war and depression. But many failed to appreciate the extent to which post-war problems depend on quick and complete victory.

The convention as a whole was a win-the-war convention, with all of its weaknesses characteristic of the present transition period in the country, and the growing gap between some of the top leaders and the local unions and rank and file.

The New York convention reflected this changing situation in a more accentuated form than other states, because the contradictions here are sharper. The death of President Lyons, who to a certain degree was a bridge between the progressive and more conservative elements in the Federation, placed before the convention the question of leadership in a very concrete form. Behind the scenes, a struggle for leadership had been going on since the death of Lyons. Hutcheson forces secretly maneuvered to place one of their henchmen at the head of the State Federation. This scheme failed because the reactionaries knew there was little chance of victory. The compromise candidate accepted was Tom Murray.

CRISIS OF LEADERSHIP

The election of Murray, who played a very positive role at the convention, by no means solved the crisis of leadership. The discrepancy between the State Executive Committee and the AFL movement in our State is becoming sharper every year. This was evident throughout the convention. While many new people are coming forward in various AFL unions, there is little change in the Executive Council. A large number of members of the Executive Council come from insignificant locals.

The leadership, vaguely conscious of the changes taking place amongst the membership, dared not face many issues squarely. Dozens of resolutions were referred for fear of coming to grips with important issues and to avoid discussion.

Progressive forces were stronger and represented a greater variety of industries and cities than previously. They were responsible for initiating the limited discussions that took place. They introduced a large number of the resolutions dealing with the war. There were more young delegates not identified with the progressive movement who took the Convention seriously and sat through the sessions while the big shots were in the lobbies. Their minds were open to convictions on many questions. The red-baiting of Abraham Lefkowitz of the Teachers

Guild and the ILGWU speaker was distasteful to these delegates, who came to decide issues on the basis of merit, not prejudice.

OLD-GUARD FEAR TREND

It is quite true that the machine still ruled the Convention. But the caution with which the old-timers moved, their fear of open discussion, the concessions made to progressive forces under pressure, show that these realistic politicians sense the progressive trends among the membership and realize that they must have felt that, if the State Federation of Labor is to live up to its responsibilities to register greater growth and influence, the leadership must be rejuvenated, infused with new blood from amongst the new leading forces that have come forward in many of the AFL unions in the State.

The program that came out of the Convention, though inadequate on many basic issues such as the second front and international labor unity, nevertheless laid the basis for increasing labor's contribution to the war and for strengthening labor's role in the political life of the state.

The progressive forces have the responsibility of seeing that their relationship with the State Federation of Labor ceases to be on the basis of yearly conventions. If the program adopted is to be realized in life and strengthened, it will be necessary for the local unions to work in close cooperation with President Murray and the Executive Council;

Help mobilize the membership in support of the legislative program adopted at the Convention;

Help to activate the AFL membership around the political non-partisan committee especially in the present campaign for registration, emphasized at the convention through a special resolution;

To see that the resolution for cooperation of the non-partisan AFL committee with the political committee of the CIO and Railroad Brotherhoods, referred to the Executive Committee, is taken up for action in the present campaign for the election of Lieutenant Governor and City Councilmen and enrollment for the 1944 primaries for delegates to the Presidential nominating conventions.

THE NAT'L CONVENTION

In October, the National AFL Convention will convene in Boston. Unfortunately, few delegates from New York will attend. However, this does not mean that the million and a half AFL members in New York cannot make their voices heard. The locals in the state belong to international unions that will have delegates at the Convention, as will the Central Trades and the State Federation of Labor. Local unions and joint boards in New York should make known to their international delegates the attitude of the membership on basic questions to press and encourage their delegates to truly represent the win-the-war sentiments of their constituents. We must remember that the Lewis issue is not yet resolved. The Hutcheson forces are working to win or cajole the Convention into readmitting Lewis. Nothing should be left undone in the local unions to prevent such action.

We are facing a new situation with regard to international labor unity. The British Trade Union Congress which adjourned a few days ago decided on an International Labor Conference of the trade unions. This proposal has already been endorsed by Confederation of Latin-American Trade Unions and the Canadian Trades Council. This poses a new question before the Convention. Shall the AFL which advocates a policy of collaboration of governments, adopt for labor the discreditable policy of isolationism, remain aloof from the world labor movement?

How can we hope to influence the peace and post-war world when the ranks of labor remain divided and therefore their influence ineffective? Such are some of the important issues on which the rank and file and local unions must advise their Convention delegates.

As far as our Party is concerned, there is one major conclusion that we can draw from this Convention, namely: the AFL workers in our State are moving in a progressive direction as part of the American nation, they are enthusiastically supporting the war and ready to respond to every call to action that will help to strengthen the war and hasten victory, if given proper leadership. Our Party can make a great contribution toward strengthening these progressive trends in the AFL if we activate and mobilize our own comrades in the AFL to take their place in the active ranks amongst the workers in the shops and local unions, to help strengthen and unify labor's efforts to win the war and the peace.