

The Historical Struggle Against the Gastonia Frame-up

By Herbert Zam

THE frame-up as a weapon against the workers has been developed into a complete system, in constant use by the capitalists. At the same time, the struggle against the frame-up has become one of the best traditions of the American proletariat, expressing the most fundamental class interests and demonstrating the solidarity of the American workers. Today, when the class struggle is sharpening and when the clashes become ever deeper and more intense, the frame-up as a means of suppression comes into more frequent use, and the struggle against it becomes one of the main weapons of the workers, one of the best means of unifying the working class in the struggle against the capitalist system.

Just as the frame-up came into general use as a class measure with the Haymarket affair more than 40 years ago, at a time when the rapid industrialization of the country had thrown masses of the proletariat into the struggle against the capitalist system on the basis of their immediate economic interests, so to-day, when the rapid industrialization of the South has drawn a new proletariat into the class war against capitalism, the frame-up is the first weapon to which the capitalists turn. And it is precisely this that makes Gastonia a historic struggle for the entire American working-class—because Gastonia today, being the struggle of the newest section of the proletariat in a recently industrialized territory, expresses the class interests of the entire proletariat, represents a historic struggle of the American workers, and serves as a means of unifying the entire working class in a struggle against capitalism.

From the first, the workers instinctively recognized the frame-up as one of the most dangerous weapons employed against them. The response of the workers in the cases of such outstanding frame-ups as the Haymarket, Haywood-Pettibone-Moyer, Giovannitti-Ettor, Centralia, Mooney-Billings, Sacco-Vanzetti cases was conclusive proof that the workers recognized the class nature of these cases and were prepared for a fight to the finish against the frame-up system. To mention even one of these cases is to recall fierce struggles, the mobilization of thousands, hundreds of thousands of workers around basic class issues. The class character of the frame-up cases was so powerful that in practically all cases the struggle extended beyond national boundaries and was taken up by thousands of workers all over the world—recall, for example, the Sacco-Vanzetti case.

In the light of historical lessons, every worker could understand that the frame-up system was again in motion from the moment it was reported that a police chief had been killed and that the leaders of the Gastonia strike were in jail charged with the killing. When the incidents connected with the case, both before and after the shooting of the police chief became known, even the worker who was unacquainted with American labor history could have no doubts. The capitalist class had determined to nip in the bud the efforts of its exploited workers to organize into unions, to fight against the speed-up and stretch-out system, to shorten hours and to improve their miserable conditions. The frame-up was the method chosen by them to smash for a long time the rising militancy of the Southern workers. The Southern bosses have scored a victory in the first round of the battle, and whether the next round will end in a victory for the workers or for the bosses depends upon whether the workers have learned the lessons of this first round and how to avoid the mistakes so far committed.

When the Communist Party entered the Gastonia struggle, it did so with an understanding of the situation and of what

that situation required. The first steps—to organize the workers into trade unions, to lead a fight for better conditions, to lead the workers strikes—in short to teach the workers how to fight against the capitalists and capitalism—were absolutely correct, and won immediate support among the most exploited workers, not only in the South but thruout the country. The mistakes later committed, however, have caused a loss of some of this support and have created uncertainty and confusion among the Southern workers. These mistakes were particularly outstanding in connection with the conduct of the trial and with the manner in which the case was handled among the broad masses of the workers. These mistakes have led to the most serious results; in the midst of one of the most important cases in history the Communist Party stood isolated from the Southern workers as well as from the workers of the country generally. The duty of the Communist Party in connection with the Gastonia case was, on the one hand, to mobilize the widest masses of the American and international proletariat against the frame-up system and on the other, to use the trial to push forward the struggle for the improvement of the conditions of the workers, for their organization and for the fight against capitalism. Instead of this, the trial itself was begun and continued as a *legal battle* of lawyers, in which the class issues were completely lost sight of, in which the conditions and struggles of the workers were not expressed, in which the roles of the National Textile Workers Union and of the Communist Party were suppressed, in which the Negro question and the struggle for equality was pushed into the background. The testimony of Beal, in actual life a devoted revolutionary fighter, was certainly not the testimony of a Communist, not even the testimony of a militant worker, while the testimony of Edith Saunders Miller, the only witness who behaved like a Communist on the witness stand, was strenuously objected to by the defense. Upon the demand of the defense itself, all incidents leading up to the killing, such as the strike, the picketing and attacks on the pickets, the raiding and demolition of the Union hall, the conditions in the mills, etc., in other words, the issue of the class struggle, were ruled out by the court. Thus, instead of being a tribunal for voicing the cause of the workers, the trial became a battle over legal technicalities. The responsibility for this rests not with Beal, not with any of the defendants or witnesses, not with the lawyers (who acted more like enemies than defenders of the strikers) but with the leadership of the Party, whose policy in the trial as expressed by Bill Dunne, its representative, was for a “legal battle involving interpretation of Amendments 6 and 14 of the constitution and dealing specifically with the attempt to deprive the defendants charged with murder of life and liberty without due process to law.”

Just as in the trial itself the class struggle was dropped, so was the same thing done in the entire handling of the case thru the dropping of the frame-up issue. By dropping the frame-up issue, the Party gave up the traditional struggle against the frame-up system and narrowed the campaign down at the very beginning. The substitution of the “right of self-defense” as the main issue, and the bombastic statements of the *Daily Worker* and the International Labor Defense that the chief of police “was killed by shots fired from the Union headquarters” and that Aderholt was “killed in self-defense by the strikers” did not make the case more revolutionary, but on the contrary prevented it becoming revolutionary by hindering the mobilization of the workers on a class basis in defense of the

Gastonia strikers and against the frame-up system. Instead of drawing in hundreds of thousands of workers into the struggle, it was confined to the Communists and their closest sympathizers. Instead of a broad mass movement, a broad proletarian united front for saving the Gastonia workers, there were only interminable appeals for money, which was sadly lacking precisely because there was no broad mass movement. In contrast with the splendid Sacco-Vanzetti movement, organized under the leadership of the C.P.-Majority Group, the Gastonia case was a sad experience for the Communist Party and for the workers. That the same false line will continue in the future is indicated by the issuance of the opportunist, legalistic slogan "*Veto the Verdict*" instead of continuing the fight on the revolutionary class slogan "*Smash the Frame-up*"!

In short the Gastonia case did not serve to further the struggle of the workers or the spread of Communist influence among them—primarily because the Communist Party, as a result of its "new course," could not develop the proper policies for the mobilization of the masses. But the fight has only just begun. The Party membership can still turn to use the lessons learned in the first stage of the struggle; it is still possible to develop a broad mass movement for the defense of the Gastonia frame-up victims and against the frame-up system. But this cannot be done as long as the present leadership and the present opportunist sectarian line rules the Party.