

Petty Bourgeois Leadership vs Proletarian Rank and File

By Wm. Z. Foster

IT is axiomatic that industrial development tends to stimulate and extend the growth of labor organizations. As these organizations take an increasing part in shaping the relations between the employing class and the working class, it is logical to expect that they would develop a stratum of officials which would generally reflect the level of advancement arrived at by the rank and file. Further, it is natural to suppose that through experience in the movement, the officials might even advance farther than the rank and file in ideology and in advocacy of progressive measures.

Yet the slightest examination of the American labor movement shows that its officialdom initiates no progressive measures and, when such measures begin to take form among the membership, the officialdom as a whole is found in bitter opposition, fighting them to the last ditch.

Labor Shopkeepers

The explanation of this phenomenon is that the labor union officialdom has itself become a special section within the ruling class. It is a section of the petty bourgeoisie. It has a distinctive economic interest in maintaining the *status quo*, just as does the class of shop-keepers. This does not mean that the present union officialdom has no interest in the unions. On the contrary they are certainly and vitally interested in the struggle between the workers and employers, but it is an interest secondary to the primary interest in their personal fortunes. Labor organization is, to them, a means. Their end is their personal profit without labor. They have a property interest in the union, and therefore have the same interest in organizing and maintaining the union as has the shop-keeper in building shelves and filling them with saleable merchandise.

This property interest of officialdom is diametrically opposed to the interests of the rank and file workers. Conditions of capitalist production continually compel the workers not only to organize but to wage warfare by means of the union to improve wages, shorten hours, and better conditions. Up to a certain point these rank and file interests coincide with the property interest of the officialdom. Low wages and bad conditions assist in organizing a union, without which the dealer in labor union contracts would have no shelves and no merchandise.

But capitalist conditions are not static, and capitalism during the present epoch of its historical decline can only maintain itself by such drastic inroads on the interests of the workers that the

latter are driven into action upon a mass scale. The workers are demanding that their unions take up a more militant position in conformity with their life interests as a class. It is here that the interests of the union officialdom diverge from and become, finally, absolutely opposed to the interests of the rank and file members of the unions. It is this process which we witness today in the American movement. Almost completely the officials of the unions are lined up against every measure which tends to make of the unions an efficient instrument of the struggle against the employing class.

Not Conflicts of Opinion

This opposition does not arise from any "honest difference of opinion." The officials do not oppose the Trade Union Educational League because they are, for example, convinced that amalgamation and a labor party are bad things which would not benefit the workers. On the whole the officialdom is the most stupid and ignorant imaginable—far too low in mentality to ascribe to it an "opinion" of any nature upon theories and tactics of the labor movement. The officials of the Machinists in Toledo, Ohio, who are trying to expel the left wing members, are, for example, so ignorant that they do not know what dual unionism is or what the program of the T. U. E. L. is, although they charged these things as crimes against the members on trial. There is only one thing which could unify such a porcine element so solidly against anything, in such unity as we find among union officials against the measures of the Trade Union Educational League. That unifying element is their material interests as a class.

The fight against the union bureaucracy is a part of the class struggle. On one hand we have a great mass of workers, with little or no property, depending entirely on a weekly wage wrested from some corporation in return for considerable time and toil. Conditions on the average tend to set a standard which allows the great majority barely to exist when employed, and occasionally, to face black abysses of debt and deprivation when out of a job. Naturally, such workers demand an organization responsive to their needs, able and willing to fight for improvement.

The official class, on the other hand, are not dependent on the uncertainty of wringing a wage out of the boss every Saturday, nor of sweating for it, nor of worrying all the while if there will

be work next week. They do not draw wages; they draw salary and are sure of their job from convention to convention. These conventions come not oftener than once a year and are usually well controlled by the official machine. Some unions meet in convention only every two years, some every six years and there are one or two which never hold conventions. Such security is a rare thing for a worker, it does not exist for the rank and file.

Wealthy Labor Leaders

Not only are official incomes secure over long periods of time, but they are fantastically high. The salaries received by the officials of the American labor unions are the highest in the world. Whole sections of the petty bourgeoisie receive less average income than many union officials, whose salaries exceed that paid many responsible officials of the government. American labor union salaries are a king's ransom beside the salaries of the officials of European unions. American salaries are rarely lower than \$5,000 a year and run up to many times that amount. Yet in England recently a discussion raged for some time throughout a union over the question of increasing an official's salary from nine to ten pounds sterling a week, or from about \$35 to \$40. The princely salaries of the American union bureaucracy define the class line between it and the rank and file.

In addition, many of the officials are personally wealthy. John Mitchell, once head of the U. M. W. of A. died a millionaire. An official of the Chicago Building Trades died recently leaving an estate of \$150,000. Such incidents are very common, and arise from the wide custom of the whole officialdom from local Business Agent up to International President acquiring big money by playing the stock market under the kindly guidance of the very employers they are supposed to be fighting. This thinly veiled graft is more customary and more insidious than the cruder forms of purchase and sale which are certainly not absent.

These perquisites of union office afford the officials a totally different manner of living than that of the rank and file worker. Union officials often live in palatial homes and are catered to by servants. They stop at and in many cases reside at the very best hotels and dine at the same grill with the employers their union must fight. They may belong to the same clubs and the same lodges as do the employers. They often attend the same churches and fraternize with the bosses on every occasion the bosses permit. By these fraternal connections the employers "purify" any union leader who shows signs of proletarian spirit. He

is taken in hand and polished down. In the Elks and the Moose, union officials are given a "sheep-dip" of class collaboration. All rude notions of class conflict evaporate when the "labor leader" sits down to the poker table with employers and exchanges the usual traveling-man stories over cigars and a nice bottle of the real stuff.

Particularly do the "stag parties" of the lodges, attended by officials and the bosses, blot out the unpleasant picture of workers demanding action. Many a strike has been lost between the employer's cup and the lip of a union official at a stag party. Stag parties are a standard bait, because they get collaboration without the boss actually admitting "boorish and vulgar hired men" into home circles and "real society." As butlers who bring in "labor" on a tray, the employers must find time for "labor leaders," but still they are only high grade servants to be humored with the privilege of wearing the same lodge gew-gaw and tickled under the chin at drinking bouts.

Political Lieutenants of Capitalism

The union officialdom also has elaborate political connections with the capitalist class. It is hard to find a union official anywhere who has no connection whatever with one or the other of the capitalist parties' political machines, local, county, state or national. They trade in "favors," deliver "influence," and profit in a thousand devious ways through this connection by which the official class of the unions are organically joined to the ruling class, taking part in its plans and sharing the profits of its exploitation of the organized workers these officials are supposed to protect. To understand how thoroughly the union officials have been absorbed into the ruling class it is only necessary to note that on both old party tickets they are beginning to demand the vice-presidential nomination.

The interests of the union official are, then, to maintain the *status quo* of class relations, to keep peace between the classes even at the expense of rank and file interests, to start no trouble that disturbs class relations or allow others to start trouble; to drink, smoke, eat and play poker in corpulent comfort like the bosses. To such a situation the rank and file interests are unalterably opposed.

When the workers, forced on by conditions, go on strike, everything in this little fairy-land is upset. Labor as a union becomes unruly and as merchandise grows unsaleable. Hence the pipeline of fat sustenance is either destroyed or endangered. The "right sort" of labor leader is a boon companion at the lodge affair. The strike

leader is not. A labor official who is leading a strike is regarded with reproach. His reputation is at stake and he must settle the strike soon and satisfactorily or he is no longer welcome.

But it is not possible for a strike to exist in a comfortable, friendly atmosphere. A strike is a crisis in the class war, and it is especially hostile to the capitalists and their labor lieutenants when it is directed by a comprehensive plan and watched over by a vigilant rank and file. Class collaboration and friendly relations have to be broken off, a painful business. Local and undirected strikes, and planless discontent, is not so bad for the bureaucracy, because it can be side-tracked, stifled, or ignored. But not so with the new left-wing movement in the unions.

An Irreconcilable Conflict

This is the reason why the union officialdom stands so solidly opposed to the measures of amalgamation and the labor party. Amalgamation of the craft unions is poison to the bureaucrats, because it disturbs their comfortable *status quo*, because it makes the issues of the struggle broader and clearer, and therefore harder to compromise and sell out, because it stirs the rank and file into militant action—but above all because it directly threatens their "authority" as Grand Presidents of weak organizations by subordinating them to large and powerful unions — in short, because amalgamation is in the interest of the membership but against the special class interest of the bureaucracy, the officials fight against amalgamation with all their power.

With the labor party issue it is again the petty material interests of officials that keep the trade union movement from independent political action. Opposition to the labor party is shortsighted, because with a powerful labor party in the field even the bureaucrats would gain; parasites though they are, they would still have a richer body to feed upon. But bureaucrats see only the immediate advantage; they are so thoroughly corrupted by the capitalists, so completely entangled with the Republican and Democratic machines, so thoroughly reactionary and capitalistic in all their thoughts and actions, that they must fight against the labor party to the last ditch, no matter how crying the need for effective political action by the masses of the workers. Again, we can explain the official attitude only by pointing to the special material interests of the officialdom, as a part of the petty bourgeoisie.

Theoretically, the officials may concede—sometimes—that certain progressive measures are good. But not good for them; so they are, practically,

all against them. While locally they may approve of a labor party, as did Fitzpatrick of the Chicago Federation of Labor, yet such approval is merely a matter of expediency, and when the same movement assumes a national character and thus threatens the interests of the whole official class with destruction, then the recalcitrant is frightened, perhaps disciplined, and falls back into line.

A Section of the Class Struggle

Such are the interests of the union bureaucracy which compel the militants to fight. It is not a factional struggle. It is fighting the class struggle at the first point of contact with the enemy. Who can doubt what relations ought to exist between an honest worker of the rank and file and such leaders as Major Berry of the Pressmen, strike-breaker, Legionaire and aspirant to the democratic nomination for vice-president? Other typical bureaucrats are Jim Lynch of the Typographical Union, a dear friend of the publishers and now retired, living on the interest of accumulated wealth; Michael Boyle of Chicago; Tom Lewis, former president of the U. M. W. of A.; John A. White, another ex-president of the U. M. W. of A., and Bill Lee, president of the B. of R. T., and also president of a million dollar corporation selling equipment to the railway companies.

Granted that these conditions are deplorable, the question arises as to what can be done about it. Besides the immediate measures of amalgamating the craft unions and forming a powerful labor party, we must have some plan to do away with the bourgeois class character of union leaders. The trade union militants must begin a relentless campaign for the drastic reduction of the salaries of union officials. Some such solvent must be given to dissolve the hard and indigestible lump of official opposition in the body of labor.

While it is unquestionably true that the stratum of labor officialdom is not without its honorable exceptions, yet as a class it is rotten to the core. It gives no leadership whatever in the struggle against capitalism. It is doubtful that any remedy will be sufficient that will stop short of a complete renewal of personnel from the rank and file. A new and militant leadership must be developed.

The moldy old crust must be thrown off. New blood and young blood must come in. But this, too, will become rotten if not put on a proletarian basis. It must draw the wage of the worker. And it must, before and above all, be inspired by a real proletarian philosophy of the revolutionary class struggle, without which any new leadership will follow the old, but with which a rank and file can enter any battle with confidence of victory.