

# The Decline of the American Federation of Labor

By WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

The 48th annual convention of the A. F. of L., held in New Orleans beginning November 19, demonstrated afresh the rapid decline and degeneration of the old trade unions as labor organizations. Tendencies for the subordination of the movement to the capitalists are being strengthened; tendencies for developing the old trade unions into a real working class organization are being weakened. The A. F. of L. is becoming more and more the tool of American imperialism. The convention was the most reactionary in the history of the A. F. of L.

## FOR THE IMPERIALIST WAR

More boldly and blatantly than ever the corrupt labor bureaucrats who comprise the A. F. of L. convention, worked to further the war program of American imperialism. The whole war plan of the capitalists was endorsed: the 15 cruiser program, the Hoover trip to Latin America, attacks upon the Soviet Union, invasion of Nicaragua, the Kellogg peace pact, rationalization and all the rest of it. The militaristic speeches of P. V. McNutt, National Commander of the American Legion, and Colonel Ross of the United States Army, were wildly applauded. The convention was a riot of jingoism, thinly veiled with a hypocritical pacifism.

The convention showed that American imperialism, in its struggle for world imperialist dominion, may depend upon active support of the A. F. of L. bureaucracy to demoralize and disorganize the working class in the developing war. About the only qualification the convention put upon the capitalist war plans was that 8 of the 15 proposed cruisers should be built by union men. The bureaucracy are for the war, but they want a union label on it. They are jackals of American imperialism. The central effect of the convention was to even more deeply graft the trade unions on to the great war machine.

## FOR CAPITALIST RATIONALIZATION

Capitalist rationalization, part of the war program, received aggressive support at the convention. Not struggle against the employers, but cooperation with them, was the slogan. More definitely than ever before the strike was repudiated in theory and practice.

The Executive Council's report declared that the "economic statesmen" of labor base their program not upon strikes but upon "conference and discussion" with the employers. The national anti-strike law, now being worked up by the American Bar Association and the A. F. of L. leadership was heartily endorsed. The infamous Watson-Parker anti-strike railroad law was again blessed as real progress.

While the coal operators were tearing the United Mine Workers to pieces, this reactionary convention prattled about developing a "partnership" in industry between the workers and the capitalists. It invited the employers afresh to join with the trade union leaders to speed up the workers, under the guise of "improving production standards," and "developing systematic cooperation to make production effective." The "fight" against company unionism was envisaged merely as a campaign of "fact-finding and education" to convince the employers that the trade unions (Woll style) are better than company unions for intensifying the exploitation of the workers. It was a sheer waste of words for the convention to declare "we have no revolutionary purpose to overthrow the present social system."

#### A CRUMBLING ORGANIZATION

The decline in the A. F. of L.'s membership continues. The official report claimed a membership of 2,896,063, or 83,537 more than in 1927. But these figures are manifestly faked. Half of the so-called increase is accounted for by the reaffiliation of the Railway Clerks. The figure is further discounted by the fact that the UMWA, although it has dropped to 200,000 members, is still listed at 400,000. Correct figures would show a decline during the past year of at least 100,000 in the membership of the A. F. of L.

As the A. F. of L. declines numerically it is also gradually driven out of the key and basic industries. More and more it tends to become a skilled workers' organization in the lighter, more competitive industries. This tendency was vastly increased by the break up of the United Mine Workers. At present, of the 2,500,000 actual members in the A. F. of L., 980,000 are in the building trades, 152,000 in printing trades, 130,000 in amusement trades, 125,000 in government and municipal employ. Less than 600,000 of the members are employed in the railroad, metal, coal, and general transport industries. This tendency, one of the most significant signs of the breakdown of the old unions in the face of trustified capital, has been going on without let up since 1920. Consequently, with ever-narrowing base, the A. F. of L. becomes less and less the organ of struggle of the masses.

Moreover, the skilled worker base of the A. F. of L. in the competitive industries is also being rapidly undermined. Trustification and mechanization in these industries, together with the specialization which is breaking down the traditional crafts, is increasingly rendering the old unions powerless to maintain themselves in the face of the employers' open shop drive. Recent spectacular evidences of this undermining process are the development of the vitaphone, tele-typesetter, and automatic train control, which threaten to catastrophically wipe out three of the strongest craft unions in the A. F. of L., the Musicians, Typographical, and Railroad Telegraphers Unions. Conservative craft unionism is being crushed in trustifying American industry.

#### FAILURE IN ORGANIZATION WORK

The convention registered again the total inability of the A. F. of L. to organize the unorganized. At the 1927 convention it was announced with a great fanfare of trumpets that the A. F. of L. would organize the new industries in the South. But nothing was accomplished, any more than in the campaigns of the previous three years to "organize" the steel and automobile industries. Not a handful of workers was organized in any instance. The A. F. of L. "organizing" campaigns fall flat.

The latest convention resounded again with talk of organizing the unorganized. This was partly due to a realization of the growing crisis in the unions, to the pressure of the newly organized left unions in the mining, textile, and needle industries, the pressure of the discontented masses, and to the standing necessity of the A. F. of L. to make a pretense of representing the interests of the whole working class. The convention threw out the slogan "Double Trade Union Membership in 1929." But nothing will come of it in concrete organization. It is only a gesture. To organize the unorganized in American trustified industries necessitates a policy of struggle, a militant offensive against the employers. This can only be carried out by the left wing, led by the Communist Party, and through the establishment of a new industrial unionism. The A. F. of L., with its failing ranks, its program of class collaboration, craft unionism, and corrupt leadership, is not on the offensive against capital but in retreat before its attacks.

#### A CAPITALISTIC UNEMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

In its handling of the unemployment problem the convention showed the utter bankruptcy of the A. F. of L. leadership. While recognizing the existence of heavy unemployment, it took no steps

to meet the problem by a mass struggle for a shorter work-day and work-week, and by an organized political movement for state benefits for the unemployed. Its boasted five-day week achievements embrace not more than 150,000 workers, principally in the building trades. The convention accepted the current capitalistic "remedies" for unemployment, speeding up the workers in industry and the Hoover three billion dollar reserve building fund.

The first of these, the speed up, which the Executive Council stated would cause "a stabilization of industry that will bring regularity of work," can only cause an intensification of unemployment by throwing additional masses of workers out of jobs. It is on a par with Lewis's plan to close the "uneconomic" mines and to drive 300,000 miners out of the coal industry. The second proposal, Hoover's reserve building fund, was enthusiastically accepted as a cure for unemployment. This scheme, a part of the Foster and Catchings impossible program of liquidating the crises in capitalist economy and establishing "permanent prosperity," will prove, if any attempts are made to put it into actual practice, a powerful means to crack the building trades unions and to sharpen the unemployment problem generally. Hoover, an industrial engineer, already gives us a taste of the Capitalist Efficiency Socialism illusions developed in such profusion and under so many guises by his fellow efficiency engineers.

#### FOR A HIGH TARIFF

Indicative of the increasing subordination of the A. F. of L. leaders to the capitalists was the formation, during the convention, of the American Wage Earners Protective League. The purpose of this organization is to support the capitalist drive for a higher tariff. Seventeen organizations are affiliated to this body, including Photo Engravers, Boot & Shoe Workers, Glass Workers, Cigar-makers, Hatters, Potters, Wallpaper Makers, Steel Workers, Pattern Makers, Wire Weavers, Paper Makers, Brick Workers, Lithographers, Scenic Painters. Matthew Woll is its president, and the organization has the open support of William Green.

When the A. F. of L. was founded in 1881, the high tariff principle was endorsed under pressure of the then powerful Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers, an organization notoriously controlled by the steel magnates. In 1882, however, on the theory that the benefits of the "protective" tariff were "not passed on to the workman," the Federation rescinded its action. Gompers, himself an avowed free trader, says (P. 232 Vol. 1, "Seventy Years of Life and Labor"): "We repealed the declaration of Pittsburgh (1881) and thenceforward our federation remained neutral on this controversial question."

"Neutrality" remained the official A. F. of L. policy, except in individual cases when boss-controlled unions from time to time demanded and secured A. F. of L. endorsement of high tariff for the commodities they respectively produced. The general trend, as the leadership fell more under control of the bosses, was towards the support of high tariff. But the formation of the new tariff league is a long leap towards more complete acceptance of this employers' policy. Significant is it that Matthew Woll, bell-wether of big capital in the A. F. of L. is its President. Although the new tariff league has only 250,000 members, it foreshadows a general adoption of the high tariff by the A. F. of L. leaders, in direct violation of the interests of the workers.

#### FOR THE TRUSTS

As the A. F. of L. leaders appear more and more as advocates of high tariff, so do they increasingly give direct aid to the formation of capitalist trusts, at the expense of the workers. The New Orleans convention was notable for the absence of all attacks on the trusts. In the past the A. F. of L. participated in the various "trust busting" and regulation movements that developed from time to time. In 1899 the Federation advocated nationalizing the trusts. As late as 1920 the A. F. of L. proposed to nationalize the railroads, coal mines, and other basic industries (Plumb Plan), and in the 1924 election campaign, supported LaFollette's program of trust regulation.

But now this pecking at the trusts is being stopped. As real agents of big capital, the reactionary labor leaders increasingly come forward as advocates of capitalist trustification—all they ask is the privilege of establishing their company-unionized trade unions. Matthew Woll sounded the keynote for this fresh surrender to big capital in his recent article in the "American Federationist" entitled "Labor's Volte-Face on the Trusts." John L. Lewis's open collaboration with the big coal operators to trustify the coal industry at the expense of the miners, typifies the A. F. of L. leaders' decisive attitude towards the trusts.

#### CAPITALIST RESTRICTION OF IMMIGRATION

The A. F. of L. has long violently championed the restriction of immigration, on the ground that this, by diminishing the supply of labor power, is protective of American workers' interests. The New Orleans convention produced a fresh series of demands to restrict immigration from Mexico and Latin America, the Philippines, Canada, etc. All this was done in the short-sighted, job-trust spirit of craft unionism. It indicates a total misunderstanding and

rejection of the principles of internationalism. The A. F. of L. leaders again went even to the absurd extent of refusing to affiliate with the yellow Amsterdam International as being too revolutionary. It is a manifestation of anti-working class naturalization which receives its worst expression by supporting the capitalist class in its imperialist wars.

The existing immigration restriction laws are hailed by conservative labor leaders as a great victory for the toilers, and announced by the capitalists as a profound concession to the working class. But neither allegation is correct. Immigration restriction, while it may favor the few privileged, organized skilled workers, is essentially a basic necessity for American capitalism in this era of rationalization, and it was adopted in the interest of the employers. The latter now have no need of floods of immigrants from Europe. They secure an abundance of surplus labor power to operate the industries and to use as a club against wage scales, through the rationalization of industry, which makes hundreds of thousands of workers superfluous, and through the chronic crisis in agriculture which has driven 3,000,000 farmers into the cities and which will so drive millions more, by the migration of masses of Negroes to the North, etc. With 4,000,000 now unemployed and more in prospect, and confronted with the great problem of financially relieving the chronic unemployed, why should the employers bring in more workers, especially revolutionary European workers? The capitalists use the immigration restriction also as a basis for a great campaign of patriotic Americanization, in which they are supported by the labor bureaucrats.

#### A GENERAL SPIRIT OF REACTION

In every field the convention displayed a deeply reactionary spirit. No steps were taken to amalgamate the hopelessly obsolete craft unions. The burningly important Negro question was passed over without a word. The work of getting Mooney and Billings released was sabotaged by a meaningless resolution. Warnings about the dangers in labor banking foreshadow a new collapse of the B. of L. E. enterprises. The same old gang of labor crooks were elected to head the movement, except for Duncan, first vice-president, who died, and Tobin, treasurer, who resigned. The height of reaction was reached in expunging from the records all reference to Professor Dewey because he wrote mildly in favor of Soviet Russia.

Nothing was heard in the convention about a labor party. Never was the affiliation of the leaders to the two old parties more closely cemented. The leadership had just completed during the national

elections one of the most shameless political sell-outs in the history of American labor, with these misleaders openly prostituting themselves to the champions of big capital, Hoover and Smith. Result, the workers were a zero in the elections. Yet the convention had the brass to declare that "We are very hopeful that the majority of the members of congress will be friendly to the legislative program of the A. F. of L."

A similar spirit of reaction prevailed in the machine-ruled, boss-controlled individual conventions of trade union bodies held preceding the A. F. of L. convention, such as the Illinois Federation of Labor, and the Carpenters and Machinists Unions. In "Labor Unity" for December, Wm. Simons thus describes the growing reaction in the once militant and progressive Machinists Union:

"The Atlanta convention, 1928, moved backward. In Detroit (3 years ago), the 4 year term for officers was defeated; Atlanta carried it. In Detroit, after some discussion, 35 votes were registered against the B & O plan as against 126 votes for the Plan; at Atlanta the Plan was endorsed without discussion. In Detroit . . . Amalgamation . . . was carried. At Atlanta, the amalgamation resolution was defeated without discussion. The Detroit convention adopted a resolution for recognition of Soviet Russia; Atlanta defeated it without discussion. The Detroit convention voted to maintain biennial conventions; Atlanta voted for conventions every 4 years. Detroit had some discussion on the labor party; Atlanta voted it down without discussion."

#### WAR AGAINST THE LEFT

As an indispensable part of its program of throwing the working class demoralized into the war and rationalization program of American imperialism, the A. F. of L. attacks viciously the Communists who seek to mobilize the workers against imperialism. In the conventions held prior to the A. F. of L., notably the Carpenters and Machinists, wild assaults were made against the left, and Communist delegations were expelled without formality. The A. F. of L. convention acted in the same violent spirit. It declared that "there can be no compromise with the Communists, with their followers and adherents." These are to be expelled ruthlessly from all affiliated organizations.

Not a word of criticism was directed against the Socialists (or the moribund I. W. W.) in the convention debates or the report of the Executive Council. The whole fire was reserved for the Communists. This is a high compliment for our movement when it is so singled out for enmity and attack by these agents of the employers.

The reason for failure to attack the Socialists was again exempli-

fied at the convention. These betrayers of the workers have gone over bag and baggage to the Woll-Green machine. At the convention they came forward with no industrial or political opposition program. They made no fight against the A. F. of L. leadership. They supported the whole jingoistic, pacifistic, reactionary work of the convention. Only in such minor matters as the condemnation of the Brookwood School did they timidly demur. And the N. E. C. of the Socialist Party, meeting at the time, made no criticism of the ultra-reactionary convention, but merely called upon its followers "to establish friendly relations with organized labor." The depth of the degeneration of the Socialist Party was exposed again by the reactionary course of its trade union delegation at the New Orleans convention.

#### THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE A. F. OF L.

What is the future of the American Federation of Labor and the old craft unions generally? Are they definitely in decline as labor organizations? Does the developing war situation offer them a new lease of life and expansion, under the stimulus of the employers?

This question of the perspective of the A. F. of L. becomes very important because in it is involved the question of whether or not there is a real base for the development of the new industrial union movement. A clarification of it is especially necessary now in view of the development of incipient theories, notably in the writings and speeches of Comrades Pepper, Lovestone, and Weinstein, which foresee a regrowth of the old unions. Thus, at the 6th World Congress of the Comintern, Comrade Pepper declared: "The world hegemony of American imperialism serves as a basis for the further growth of American reformism and creates the possibilities for the further growth of the American Federation of Labor."

These theories see in the labor bureaucracy the one instrument of the employers in the industries for spreading reformist illusions among the workers. Thus the necessity for the employers to preserve and extend the old union movement. This is especially indispensable for them, or so the implication goes, in view of their necessity for demoralizing the workers in the face of the developing war program of American imperialism. With the extension of the old unions the new unions would have no real base. The implication is that we must begin to re-orientate ourselves again on the old unions. Among the first signs of this implied re-orientation are the neglect of building the new unions and the fabrication of fabulous difficulties in the way of their organization.



Now let us see what is the present attitude of big capital towards the old unions and whether or not this is likely to change in the developing war situation, and if so, in what direction.

The present basic trend of trustified capital is against the establishment of even company-unionized trade unions in the industries. It has driven trade unionism from one industry after another until the old unions are confined pretty much too the lighter, competitive industries. Open shop, trustified American capital, basing its mass production program upon the control of its workers by its own industrial engineers and depending primarily upon its own apparatus (welfare schemes, profit-sharing, stock-buying, etc., etc.) to spread reformist illusions among the workers, rejects the proposals of the A. F. of L. leaders to organize the workers into company-unionized trade unions and to exploit them through "union-management co-operation," with its anti-working class harmony of interests ideology. The big capitalists use the A. F. of L. leaders as tools to demoralize the workers in the face of the growing war danger. This they will continue to do. But they refuse to organize their workers, even the skilled, into the emasculated trade unions. The employers tend to rely more upon their own elaborate mechanism for sowing illusions among the workers directly in the industries, their efficiency engineers, personnel managers, and the many schemes and organizations for this special purpose. They are gradually breaking down the old trade union movement. They refuse to accept and recognize it, notwithstanding its intensified class collaboration and jingoistic war program.

The weakness of the theory of Comrades Pepper, Lovestone and Weinstone (the rebuilding of the A. F. of L.) is that they fail to see that the main reliance of the employers for propagating reformist illusions among the workers is not so much the A. F. of L. and the S. P., as their own engineer-economist-company union apparatus; that in this period, although the A. F. of L. and the S. P. are in decline the propagation of reformist illusions is on the increase.

Will the capitalists, with a growing war situation and an actual or threatened expansion of the new unions, change their anti-union policy and depend for the propagation of reformist illusions among the workers upon a spread of the old unions in basic industry? This is very unlikely. On the contrary, in an immediate war situation the employers, in order to demoralize and break the workers' ranks, would not develop the traditional trade unionism, but new forms of company unionism. Into this company unionism the labor bureaucracy would be organically absorbed largely or wholly. Instead of rebuilding the A. F. of L. into a system of labor unionism in the

basic industries, the capitalists will use it exactly as an instrument to prevent the unionizing of their workers.

This war-time type of unionism would be not so much company-unionized trade unions as company unionism covered with a thin veneer of trade union traditions, terminology, etc. It would be largely fascist, the labor bureaucrats, often the nominal heads of it, looking upon themselves as direct agents of the employers and warring violently, with open police cooperation, against the left wing which will lead real mass movements against the employers and the State. Such company unionism would be so hostile to the workers that our policy would doubtless be to smash it by pressure of the new unions from without and by attacks from within.

In the present situation the A. F. of L. bureaucracy is a deadly enemy to the workers and it must be fought ruthlessly. In an approaching war situation it would become even more dangerous as an instrument of capitalist reformism and war. But while fighting it without let up, we must also not lose sight of the other instruments and movements used by the capitalists (company unions, welfare schemes, etc.) to demoralize the workers.

During the last war the capitalists, although incorporating the trade union bureaucracy into the war machine, nevertheless made much resistance to the introduction of the trade unions into the industries, with the notable exceptions of the railroads and the munitions plants. They by no means abandoned their traditional open shop policy. They built the company union movement, with its maze of welfare schemes, eac., as a barrier against trade unionism. The bureaucracy made a mild show of resisting this company unionism and of insisting upon the recognition of the trade unions. But with a war situation developing now they would surrender outright to the ensuing system of company unionism. American imperialism is now vastly stronger than in the last war, the trade unions are weaker, and the leaders more corrupt and degenerated. The bureaucrats would become openly agents of the employers.

The stage is now being set for such a betrayal. Ideologically, the trade union bureaucrats have surrendered completely to the capitalists. They are for the war program whole heartedly, with its rationalization of industry and permanent prosperity illusions. They are steadily degenerating the trade unions in the direction of company unionism. An immediate war situation would be the signal for them to complete their treachery and to reduce the trade union movement practically to an organic part of the employers' system of company unionism.

## THE TASKS BEFORE US

From the foregoing it is evident that our basic task is the building of new industrial unions in the unorganized and semi-organized industries. These must be based primarily upon the semi-skilled and unskilled, the most exploited sections of the workers. Special attention, in all this work of organizing the unorganized, must be given to drawing in the increasing masses of Negro industrial workers. The A. F. of L. bureaucracy is a deadly enemy to all this.

The A. F. of L. is definitely in decline as a labor organization. It cannot and will not organize the unorganized. Its reactionary leadership refuses to build up the organization with the necessary policy of struggle. And it is an illusion to believe that the employers will build it up in an immediate war situation—they will construct instead a company unionism which will swallow the old unionism. The new unions are vitally necessary now to organize the present growing struggles of the masses, which the reactionary A. F. of L. officialdom refuses to lead, and they will be all the more necessary in a war situation as the unions of the workers to mobilize the masses for struggle against the employers' system of company unionism headed wholly or in part by the reactionary trade union bureaucracy. The present diletantism in the building of the new unions must be ruthlessly eradicated and a militant policy of organization initiated.

Although the organization of the unorganized into the new unions is our major task it would nevertheless be a serious mistake to abandon the work in the old unions. There are decided tendencies to do this at present. For example, and this situation is typical, we had not a single left wing delegate in the recent conventions of the Illinois Federation of Labor and the American Federation of Labor. This tendency to abandon the old unions to the reactionaries must be corrected. It would be a grave mistake to judge the rank and file of the old unions by the reactionary, unrepresentative conventions. Deep currents of discontent run in the old unions. For want of leadership this expresses itself mostly by pessimism and lowered morale. Even the reactionary Tobin at the A. F. of L. convention had to give warning of this situation. The discontent of the masses in the old unions, especially those of the lesser skilled, will become keener under the inevitable attacks of the employers. It is a vital task of ours to organize these discontented masses and to lead them in struggle against the reactionary union leaders of the imperialists, the employers and the whole war program.

Events are proving the correctness of the Comintern and Profinintern line for the building of new unions in the United States,

without neglecting the work in the old unions. It is our task to bring the needed new unions into existence. It is along this general line that the Workers (Communist) Party can and will place itself at the head of the masses struggling against American imperialism.

To build the new unions and to organize the left wing in the old unions the Trade Union Educational League must be greatly strengthened. The T.U.E.L. must function openly as the organizer of the unorganized. It must coordinate the work of the new unions, among themselves and with the organized left wing in the old unions. It must come forward with a militant propaganda to acquaint American workers with the R. I. L. U. and to build up a strong R. I. L. U. center in this country. It has been a serious mistake not to have given the T. U. E. L. real support and not to have brought it more prominently to the fore in the struggles of the workers.

All our trade union work among the masses, in the shops, in the new unions, and in the old unions, must be based upon the general struggle against the war danger. We must expose the militaristic, pacifistic program of the A. F. of L. bureaucrats. We must fight against capitalist rationalization, with its wage cuts, speed up, and whole system of prosperity illusions. We must unite closely with the workers of Latin America for struggle against American imperialism and its tool, the Pan-American Federation of Labor. We must join hands with the workers of the world, under the leadership of the Communist International, for the defense of the Soviet Union and the Chinese Revolution, and for revolutionary struggle against the impending world clash of the imperialists.



THE RED INSPECTOR—*Drawn by Wm. Siegel*