

THE AFL-CIO MERGER

By WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

THE FUSION of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Unions, after 20 years of division and strife in labor's ranks, has finally been brought to reality. Dec. 5, 1955, will be a red-letter day in the history of the labor movement of this country. The merger marks a tremendous step forward for the whole working class. As such, it will be hailed by the organized workers of every country in the world; in those with Socialist regimes as well as in those that are still living under capitalism.

The howls of the big employers' agents that this new federation is a labor monopoly expresses their fear of its great potential power. We may be sure, they will soon seek either to undermine or destroy the effectiveness of the new organization.

The junction of the AFL-CIO, which through the present consolidation unites some 15,000,000 members, enormously increases the potential strength of the working class in many directions. The united workers will be far better able to go ahead with the urgent tasks of organizing the unorganized, especially in the South. They can also more readily unite the rest of the trade union movement by bringing the Miners, Railroad Brotherhoods, and others into the AFL-CIO. They will likewise, under the banner of the new organization, be enabled to develop much more solidarity on the firing lines of the economic struggles and likewise to overcome the plague of union raiding which during past years has wrought so much harm to the labor movement.

And every progressive force will hail the historic inclusion of two Negro workers in the Executive Council of the new federation, as this will tend greatly to cement still closer the bonds between the Negro and white workers in this country. With a new spirit of unity and independence, the huge new AFL-CIO could also become a real world power for peace.

THE MERGER especially has tremendous potential significance in the field of political action. With this vast mass of workers under one banner the working class will be able to make itself really felt in politics and to end the present deplorable situation, where organized labor has few or no representatives politically in all governmental bodies on all levels. This new political strength will be particularly important in the key 1956 elections, when labor will be function primarily with the progressives within the Democratic Party. In the long run, the inclusion of the vast army of labor under the new federation will also greatly facilitate the eventual formation of a powerful Labor-Farmer Party.

The new AFL-CIO is the fruition of the generations of hard struggle on the part of the working class, in which the left and progressive forces have done more than their full share. The right wing, now as always, is a drag upon the movement. Especially has the tempo of working class development taken faster speed since the days of the terrible economic crisis of 1929-33. Nor will it stop with the achievement of this latest step. The trade union movement, despite all conservative protestations to the contrary, is a fighting body; and under eventual progressive leadership, it will

continue on until the working class has completely defeated the capitalist enemy and made itself and its democratic allies the leaders of the nation under a Socialist regime.

OBVIOUSLY, the major task of the left and progressive forces everywhere in the labor movement is to utilize the new labor strength and enthusiasm generated by the merger to strive to strengthen labor in every direction. This means to carry the unity movement effectively into every industry and locality, to push more energetically for wage increases and the 30-hour work-week, to unfold vigorous organizing campaigns in the various unorganized categories, industries, and localities, to develop an active struggle generally in defense of civil rights, to knock out the Taft-Hartley and state anti-labor laws, and especially to fight for the protection of the rights of the Negro people.

The election campaign of 1956 should be made a burning issue throughout the entire labor movement. So far as possible, all these activities should be tied in with official decisions of the AFL-CIO convention and conducted upon a united front basis.

The united front work must be conducted upon the broadest possible basis, ranging from rank and file workers to top officials, who may be ready to fight for all or part of a progressive program. The foundation of such a united front must be solid work among the rank and file. The workers must beware of mere maneuverings with dubious top officials, which would enmesh them in a swamp of right opportunism.

THE VITAL MATTER of international trade union unity should not be neglected. The easing of international tension following the Geneva Conference opens the way for the coming together more readily of the forces of labor on a world scale, and this situation should be followed up. A major step in this direction would be the sending of an AFL-CIO delegation to the USSR and People's China.

While thus hailing the realization of the new labor unity and while doing all possible to translate this into concrete terms of labor achievement in all fields, we also must be aware that the merged federation is starting out under some heavy handicaps, particularly of an internal character. One of the most serious of these is the conservative make-up of its top leadership. This is particularly true of the powerful eight-man Executive Committee, composed of Meany, Woll, Harrison, Bates, Schnitzler, Reuther, McDonald, and Carey.

In the 29-man Executive Committee there are a few with occasional mildly progressive views. While there are political gradations even among eight top leaders, they have, one and all, during the past decade, actively practiced crass class collaboration with the big capitalists, indulged in bitter Soviet-baiting, and given active support to the pro-war foreign policies of the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations. They also were leaders in dividing the trade unions of Germany, France, and Italy, and in splitting the World Federation of Trade Unions. And, of course, they are all ardent defenders of monopoly capitalism.

Such a top leadership is definitely a handicap to the new organization, but American labor history shows that the awakened workers will find the means, nevertheless, to fight their capitalist enemy. While we oppose the general line of this leadership, nevertheless, when any of them take possible progressive

steps, we must and will actively support them.

A SECOND WEAKNESS in the new set-up of labor is its profound lack of trade union democracy. The AFL has always been very deficient in this respect, and the CIO especially during the last half dozen years, has suffered greatly from this corroding evil. This democratic failure has expressed itself in the absence of working class controls over the organizations, in lingering discrimination against Negro workers, and in arbitrary and un-cooperative relations among the affiliated organizations.

The new federation's constitution further weakens the small degree of trade union democracy that did formerly exist. By extending the period between national conventions, by still further confining the conventions to top union officials, and by various other undemocratic devices, it pushes control by the actual workers down toward the zero mark.

Characteristically, in bringing about the present merger, the masses of workers were in no way consulted regarding their wishes as to what should be done. In the period ahead, the constitution just formulated will prove to be a heavy handicap to the new organization, and eventually it will have to be drastically remodelled.

A THIRD SHORTCOMING of the new federation convention was its failure to make a break with the basic class collaboration policy which, especially during recent years, has done so much injury to the trade union movement. The convention adopted a number of good practical resolutions, which the Daily Worker has commented upon and which we must actively support, but on a number of other questions it did not adopt a general militant position to correspond to its big forward step in combining the two federations.

Mr. Meany, the President, in a long article in the New York Times of Dec. 4, undertook to restate this current class collaboration policy in vigorous terms and to commit the organization to it. There are at least three major points in Mr. Meany's program that should be opposed.

First, having got rid of the old class struggle preamble of the AFL, Meany sought to tie the organization definitely to a dolled-up version of the old discredited Gompers formula of the identity of the interests of labor and capital, when he said: "The interests of labor and management are interdependent, not inimical." Such stuff is poison to the workers.

Second, along this general line of class collaboration, Mr. Meany proposed a broad "non-aggression pact" with big business. American and world labor experience has shown definitely that such collaborationist pacts can have only detrimental effects upon organized labor and its struggle. Let us remember that there are reactionaries, both within and without the labor movement, who would only be too glad to try to use the new labor unity as a means to tie up labor movement to the chariots of big business.

Third, Mr. Meany, in his program, also re-echoed the interests of big capital when he proposed the continuation of the capitalist fight against Communism as the concern and interest of the working class. This was the sense of the resolution on foreign policy adopted unanimously by the convention. Such reactionary red-baiting can only do the most serious harm to the American labor movement and

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to the progressive cause in general.

STILL ANOTHER shortcoming in the consolidation of the two federations was the glaring weakness shown in the proceedings by the left-progressive forces. While there was some good discussion of the Negro question and upon one or two other subjects, in the main it must be said that the broad Left raised no effective voice whatever, nor did it present a comprehensive progressive program, either at the separate AFL and CIO convention, or at the joint AFL-CIO merger convention.

This was not because there was no progressive sentiment in the organizations. On the contrary, there was, and still is, much concern and discontent especially in the CIO, at the failure of Reuther to negotiate better representation in the leading committees of the new federation, to secure more adequate protection for the industrial unions against the expressed predatory designs of some craft union leaders, to guard better against anti-Negro discrimination, and to develop more of a fighting program. The very merger itself testifies to the wide spirit of progress among the trade union masses.

But the trouble was that this constructive spirit and discontent found no real leadership. Mike Quill, a lone wolf oppositionist, made some justified criticisms, but his fight to prevent the merger, like John H. Lewis' similar attitude, was basically wrong. Sharp criticism, as indicated above, was definitely in order, but it had to be subordinate to a full support of the merger as such. Quill's program was not one that could unite the left-progressive forces.

The failure of the left and center forces to raise their voices at the unity convention was largely the result of the expulsion in 1949 of almost a million of the most progressive workers in the CIO, and also because of the rabid campaign of red-baiting that has been such a poisonous force for the past several years in both the AFL and CIO. This campaign, while directed formally against the Communists, has also served to demoralize and intimidate the progressive forces in general. It must

be added, too, that the Communist Party, heavily harassed by government persecution, did not display the activity around the merger question that it should have done.

The right wing was in firm control of the merger situation, but this bureaucratic control will not last: In a United States with an ever more shaky economic system, and in a world with a constantly deepening general crisis, the burning economic and political needs of the American workers will determine otherwise.

It would be nonsense to assume that the vast membership of the new organization is going to fall tamely into the pattern of conservatism, organizationally and politically, that Meany, Woll, Harrison, and the others have worked out for it. Besides, there are strong currents of constructive discontent among some official ranks. Properly led, such divergences and differences among the officialdom, particularly those in the lower categories, plus active rank and file work, can have progressive consequences in the building and functioning of the organization as a whole.

With its progressive background, most of the CIO lesser leadership, like masses of the membership, will find it very difficult, if not impossible, to swallow the crass and outspoken reaction of the AFL top leaders. In fact, the CIO forces, in large part, will form something of a moderate left within the AFL-CIO. This is a basic consideration which must be always borne in mind.

FOLLOWING this historic convention, the task of the left and progressive elements, as remarked earlier, must be to develop to the full the great potential strengths of the new federation. They must be the tireless fighters to strengthen the new federation in every respect, and to use it most effectively, upon both the economic and political fields, so as to best further the interests of the working class. They must know how to work closely with and to develop every progressive tendency, from the rank and file to the top leadership. In pursuing this policy, they must also seek to give the AFL-CIO a truly progressive

program, to democratize it, and to improve the quality of the leadership. This is the way to make the great new federation a body truly representative of the workers' interests and well able to defend them.

Jansen Plans No Action on Lag in Reading Ability

Superintendent of Schools William Jansen, commenting on recent high school tests showing reading and arithmetic retardation, said not much could be done about it this year "because of the tight situation with regard to staff." He hoped that "in the next budget" the Board would fare better so as "to provide the staff necessary to carry out recommendations for remedial work."

The Board of Estimate recently cut the modest demands made by the Board of Education for teachers for remedial instruction, and as usual the Board failed to put up any fight.

Tests analyzed at recent conferences of high school principals and other Board of Education administrative assistants showed that of all the pupils who entered New York City high schools last September, more than half are reading below their grade norms, and 38.3 percent one year or more below.

Almost half also are reading below their ability as measured by IQ scores, said Bernard E. Donovan, administrative director of the high school division, who made the analysis.

The conferences agreed more remedial reading teachers were needed.

Of the 18,711 pupils entering last fall from elementary schools, it was said 52.6 percent were under par in reading. Of the 25,587 entering high school from junior high school (at higher levels) 56.6 percent were below norm.

Tests were conducted in 50 or more academic high schools. Of the total, 42.1 percent were reading at approximately their capability. Some 15.6 percent were about a year above what was expected from their IQ. Below average by about a year were 42.3 percent; by about two years or more, 18.1 percent; three years, six percent, and four years or more, 1.6 percent.