

Significance of the Auto Workers Strike

By JAY LOVESTONE

WE have been living through decisive weeks that will go down in history as epoch-making for American labor—and, therefore, for the international labor movement. Events of paramount import have been following each other at a dizzying tempo. What fortunate days to be honored by the magnificent automobile strike, the General Motors Corporation being brought to its knees and forced to sign an agreement with the United Automobile Workers, and the United States Steel Corporation subsidiary, Carnegie-Illinois Corporation, granting recognition to the Steel Workers Organization Committee!

Only a Beginning

These great events are not the end. They are but the beginning of a movement that will change radically the face, mind and heart of the entire American labor movement. Nor is this beginning something sudden or mysterious, something artificial or superimposed by benevolent Roosevelt Democrats or inspired working class radicals. The historic developments in the steel, auto, rubber, radio and other mass production industries are but signs of the times, evidence of a new day dawning for the labor movement. Here we deal with phenomena rooted in the social and economic consequences of the most profound crisis yet lived through by capitalist economy in the U.S.

In this whole trend, in this entire sweep, the mighty struggle of the automobile workers, the splendid battle waged by the UAW, led by its dynamic and promising leader, Homer Martin, was decisive. Had the auto workers not given that immeasurable spontaneous response, had they not shown that thrilling readiness to battle to a finish, the CIO would have been, at least momentarily, worsted in its struggle for unionization of the mass production industries and the entire labor movement would have suffered a costly defeat. It took courageous far-sighted leadership for the CIO, headed by John L. Lewis, it took dogged battling and skillful leadership by the UAW to insure this major working class victory and to turn the tide and change the course for all labor in this country.

It is in this light that we desire to examine the significance of the auto strike and what it heralds for the labor movement as a whole, to analyze the new problems of working class strategy. Furthermore, the very attempts at unionizing mass production industries, the application of the "sit-down" strategy, the new moods among the workers massed by the hundreds of thousands in the heavy basic industries place before us a number of theoretical or fundamental questions. We are at once pressed for answers and solutions of problems vital to the future as well as the present of the American working class as a class. The General Motors chieftain, Knudsen, did not err when he cried, in the midst of the auto struggle: "The strike is an issue between property rights and no property rights." Nor did GM make a mistake when, in the white heat of the battle, it assigned one of its top executives to study Marx's "Capital."

Monumental Import of Strike

It is not merely the numbers involved that made the auto strike so important. It is where the numbers came from, it's where the striking workers hailed from, it's the very involving of a new industry that lent vital significance to the revolt of the auto workers. In the annals of American labor his-

tory, the recent GM strike will be registered as the first serious, dramatic and successful effort to unionize a mass production industry.

What is more, in this struggle there were engaged no mere "foreigners," no "poor Hunkies," no "ignorant immigrants." The front-line soldiers here, the men who went over the top in this attack were almost solely of native stock—in many cases folks who had come up from the South. With this new layer of workers as torch-bearers and trench-stormers, the auto battle was fought to a victorious finish. It is in this fashion that more concrete was added to the solid foundation for a new unionism in the U. S. Of course, we speak of a "new unionism" only in the sense employed to evaluate the pouring of hundreds of thousands of workers, hitherto unorganized, into the British trade unions at the beginning of the century.

In parenthesis, let me add that it is precisely these Flint, Lansing, and Detroit workers from the reactionary South that had been brought to the Michigan and other auto centers. They were supposed to be sort of "strike-proof" immune to the wiles of "agitators" and "outsiders," as it were. Yet in the throes of the struggle in Flint, a prominent auto corporation executive saw fit to denounce these supposedly docile workers as "rumpus-raisers" who had to be gotten rid of at all costs.

Towards New Strike Strategy

It is no accident that in a conflict waged in such an industry and under such circumstances the workers on strike should display great initiative and ingenuity and should make a major contribution to new strike strategy and technique. We have in mind not merely the "sit-down" as a weapon. We point to the efficacy of the strategy of striking at the vital sectors of mass production industries. Through tying up the body plants, or a motor plant, or a frame plant and thus paralyzing the economic process far beyond the number of workers involved outright and directly, the automobile workers union and leadership has blazed a new path for American labor in its struggle for decent working and living conditions.

Clogging the neck of the bottle is decisive in a strike in a mass production industry. The "sit-down" strike, if employed by an intelligent, alert leadership after careful preparation of various moves suited to the specific conditions of the industry affected, means a sure stand-up for profits. There is nothing else that will bring bosses to their senses as quickly. However, it is asinine and scarcely short of criminal to toy with the "sit-down," to have college youngsters on a lark to Washington clean its pavements by making a caricature of this very serious weapon employed by workers on the firing line against the giants of industry and finance. Only those afflicted with incalculable insolence and infinite irresponsibility can dare resort to the "sit-down" in order to get publicity for an organization having Governor Hoffman as one of its directors.

Foundations of New Unionism

In view of the new group of workers and new industries involved, in view of the vigorous leadership that is being developed through the dramatic struggles in the automobile fields, the entire problem of the organization of the mass production industries has been brought into the boldest relief. It must be stressed that altogether too often have observers

overlooked the fact that the future of many of the craft unions and the interests of all of their members are also at stake in this fight for the unionization of the millions of unskilled and semi-skilled in the mass production industries. Unless the latter open-shop fortresses are unionized to a substantial degree, unless some of their most strategic outposts are literally stormed, all labor standards—those of the skilled as well as those of the unskilled—are bound to deteriorate. To the credit of very large sections of the membership of the craft organizations affiliated to the A. F. of L. and growing numbers in the lower layers of leadership in these bodies, it must be noted that during the automobile strike they were very much aware of this truth. For a confirmation of this, we need but cite the conduct of the craft unions in the Detroit Federation of Labor and the action of the Columbia Lodge of the International Association of Machinists.

No pigmies locked horns in the auto conflict. It was a battle of giants. It was a battle between the biggest aggregation of capitalist interests and the most militant and largest bona-fide trade union membership led by such fighting trade union stalwarts as John L. Lewis and John Brophy and such capable, energetic and inspiring leaders like Homer Martin and his colleagues. It was the class struggle conducted on a mass basis; it was a militant strike organized, led and fought on a mass production basis. Hence, the very dimensions of the struggle, the very size of the contestants add to the importance and underscore the significance of the issues involved and the results attained.

Political Awareness of Labor

Despite Roosevelt's persistent efforts to steer clear of the auto strike, the Federal government was immediately drawn into it. The Michigan and Indiana state administrations were in it head over heels in no time. It has been a mighty long time since so much attention was focused on an injunction in a labor struggle as there was centered on the hearings

KILLED BY FASCISTS



Ben Lieder

Ben Lieder, member of the Newspaper Guild, and skilled aviator, was killed flying for the Spanish government it has been learned. Lieder had gone to Spain some months ago to aid the embattled Spanish workers and peasants in their struggle against fascism. He had often flown in America for the Newspaper Guild, having once greeted a publisher returning from Europe by flying over the boat with picket streamers.

at Flint. Here was an intense political experience for labor, an experience enabling labor to learn in a very short time as much as it normally takes them years.

We cannot stress with sufficient emphasis that Lewis displayed magnificent strategy and real proletarian class health and cleanliness in the way in which he handled Roosevelt throughout the automobile strike and negotiations. Some chicken-hearted, hat-in-hand, self-over-advertised progressive labor leaders at first thought otherwise. They threw up their hands in horror; they set up their own private wailing walls and shrieked to Jehovah that all was lost. We hope that Lewis taught them the

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ON THE LABOR FRONT

● **NEWSPAPER GUILDSMEN** broke off negotiations with the Scripps-Howard World Telegram when this sickly attempt at liberalism insisted that any contract signed with the American Newspaper Guild must be on the company union form.

● **FARM UNION** to include all organizations of farm laborers now in the A. F. of L. or independent is now under consideration. There are about 50 organizations of farm laborers, of these 30 are independent groups made up mainly of Mexicans and Filipinos. The unified organization would number about 200,000. Already the question of international charter as against the present federal local set-up has come up.

● **DOUGLAS AIRCRAFT** is still being picketed. Of the sit-down strikers arrested after ejection from the factory some are still being held. The strike leaders face a two year jail term.

● **MEYER ADELMAN**, fighting CIO leader of the Fansteel strikers, was finally arrested in Wisconsin and an attempt to extradite him to Illinois is being made. Picketing at the factory continues but under severe injunctions restrictions.

● **BRASS WORKERS** (10,000) secured wage increases adding \$1,300,000 to the payroll. New wage scales applies to all plants of the American Brass Co. located

at Kenosha, Wisc., Waterbury, Ansonia, and Torrington, Conn., and at Buffalo and Detroit.

● **"SANDHOGS"** organized in the local which the murdered Redwood headed are continuing the strike against contractor Rosoff, who is now under suspicion for complicity in the murder.

● **HOSIERY WORKERS** in Reading closed down 16 mills involving about 6,000 workers. Refusal to settle the strike in the Berkshire Mill was the initial cause, according to the American Federation of Hosiery Workers.

● **SHOE WORKERS** now have one organization as a result of the merger of the United Shoe and Leather Workers and the Shoe Workers Protective. The committee heading the new organization works closely with the CIO and voted to call in representatives of the CIO to supervise its organization drive. The CIO assigned Powers Hapgood and Adolph Gerner.

The Brotherhood of Shoe and Allied Craftsmen voted against merger by a slight margin. The organization is confined to Brockton, Mass.

● **MINE CONFERENCES** seeking a new contract for the Appalachian Districts of the soft coal industry adjourned until March 9 on motion of John L. Lewis.

(See other pages for steel, auto, electrical and other labor news.)

Significance of Auto Strike

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a-b-c of elementary school working class politics. Regardless of how much these kow-towing labor leaders may have thus unlearned or how little they may have thus learned, it cannot be denied that thousands of workers became more politically conscious as a result of their experience in the auto strike. This enhancement of the trend toward independent working class political thought and action is an event of monumental import for the labor movement as a whole.

In fact the auto strike itself was a reflex of a certain mood of awakening among the workers. The workers in general, and the auto, steel, and rubber workers and miners in particular have had the feeling that they scored a big victory in the November elections. They feel that they want to march on and improve their conditions. This notion about having scored a victory may be only an illusion, but it is a powerful illusion and has certain vital objective consequences—stimulating the workers' will to fight and their determination to win. The auto workers especially were hell bent on avoiding a repetition of the disastrous double-cross they suffered in the 1934 Green-Roosevelt-Wolman pact selling them down the river. In no small measure did these moods explain the vigor and elan with which the auto workers flung themselves into the battle.

Gathering the Fascist Gangs

Let no one for a moment think that the employing class was asleep in this history-making struggle. The titans of industry, the kingpins of finance were wide awake. They have also learned through this bitter experience. They have begun to work out a new strategy to fight labor. In its use of the "company mob," a mass weapon

for dividing labor and smashing strikes, General Motors has written more than one ugly page for the employing class. The union defeated the Flint Alliance. However, organizations of this type with roots among the workers are more dangerous than the packs of professional, imported scabs, strikebreaking "outsiders," specialized vigilantes and filthy mercenaries. In the Flint Alliance and organizations of this type we have an aggravated expression in the most menacing form, of nascent fascist outfits—far more dangerous than the Vigilante bands which have no broad base.

Clean-Cut Victory For CIO

Finally, the outcome of the auto strike will go a long way toward determining the outcome of the conflict between the AFL and the CIO. The victory scored by the UAW in GM and other strikes paved the way for the beginning of a change of policy toward unionism on the part of the U. S. Steel and General Electric Companies. Within fifteen months the CIO was able to do a thousand times as much as the A. F. of L. tried and did do in the mass production industries in several decades. If one keeps in mind that the real issue between the AFL and the CIO was whether an earnest and sound effort should be made to unionize the mass production industries, he will readily see how rapidly the CIO is defeating the AFL backsliders. This fight is far from over. But the auto victory and the tremendous impetus it has lent to organization and union recognition in steel and other mass production industries will go a long way towards settling the struggle in favor of the CIO and, therefore, in favor of working class progress.

On the basis of the above it is clear that the auto strike and its

Elizabeth, N. J.—(UNS)—Union County Central Labor Union is "100% behind the organizing campaign of the New Jersey Council for Industrial Organization," Pres. Geo. Cushing of the C.L.U. informed Mayor Brophy, following Gov. Hoffman's radio attack on the union campaign.

"We are going to help that drive in every possible fashion," Cushing said. "We shall provide our sound truck and all other necessary assistance."

victorious termination will have a marked effect on the political and economic developments in the country for the next few years. Governor Murphy's political star is rising. The auto strike of 1937 will have many echoes in the 1940 elections. The auto strike—its outcome the emergence of a mighty, stable, automobile workers union with several hundred thousands members—these are events and experiences for which working class militants live and fight for decades. These are milestones in the achievements of American labor. We value them as signposts on the road to working class victory.

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