

The Labor "Battle Of The Century"

By JAY LOVESTONE

DETROIT once spelled failure in the heart of American unionism. Detroit today is the symbol of the surge of millions of American workers taking their first steps to come into their own. Detroit, Flint, Lansing, Pittsburgh, Chicago—these are magic names that will hold the country spellbound in the coming months.

Why? Let's have the U. S. News, that garrulous champion of the public, "the people as a whole," against labor as a class, essay an answer.

"It is now a year and a half since John L. Lewis launched a new drive to achieve such mass unionization of workers. He professed an end of patience with the pace of the A. F. of L. and its policy of organizing by crafts. Resigning his official position with the Federation, he led eight international unions, since increased to sixteen, in a move to form the Committee for Industrial Organization.

"Today, members of this group are bargaining with the largest units in the automobile and steel industries—enterprises previously pledged against dealing with unions other than those sponsored by themselves....

"By all odds, the most rapid increase in membership has taken place in the unions associated with the CIO. The steel union grew from 8,000 to an estimated total approaching 200,000. The automobile union increased from about 20,000 to ten times this number. Members of the radio union grew from less than 20,000 to 75,000. Rubber workers, glass workers, and gas and oil unions similarly multiplied the number of their members." (March 8, 1937).

G. M. Victory Led Way

Phenomenal growth indeed! And by this time, these figures are badly out-of-date. The entire country first woke up to this avalanche when "Big Steel" signed on the dotted line. The latter was only a logical consequence of giant significance flowing from the defeat administered to General Motors by the auto workers. Rarely does a single event of and by itself mean so much. "Big Business" knows it and has frankly said so:

"The labor 'battle of the century' has been called off... For the union, and for Mr. Lewis as leader of industrial unionism in this country, the agreement means a historic gain. Lewis is now in a position to proceed with effective organization both in motors and steel, and with the door open to him here it can hardly be closed in other mass production industries. An era of labor-management relations is closed; a new era opens. Seldom does a single happening appear so closely to draw the line that closes off the reign of old ideas....

"Granting the inevitability of collective bargaining, there is no logic in resisting it with closed eyes and ears... Mr. Lewis' unionism is immature, but in time it can become a stabilizing factor in prosperity, and it is more likely to gain this stature in the school of negotiations than on the picket line or under gas attack." (The Financial Observer, March 9, 1937).

These are no tipster's effusions. They are deliberately chosen words pregnant with ominous im-

port. Such conscious employing-class reactions, as well as the tidal influx of recruits into the CIO, place before the labor movement some extremely vital problems begging for recognition and crying for solution. In stating only a few of them and in attempting suggestions towards their being worked-out, we are not looking at these problems from on high, above the battle or beside the controversy. We of the Communist Party (Opposition) face and speak of these situations only as active participants and as conscious partisans. From the very inception of the CIO we have emphasized that much of the future of the American labor movement revolves around the fate of the drive for industrial unionization of the mass production industries led by Lewis, Brophy and Murray.

Towards Legalization Of Unionism In Mass Production Industries

Above all it is necessary to have a sound evaluation of the struggle to establish unionism in the mass production industries. On paper, trade unions are not illegal in the U. S. A century ago it was still a statutory crime to organize a union because it infringed upon and interfered with "the rights of private property." In a general way, in the abstract, labor has knocked into a cocked hat such legal philosophy. In practice, however, in life as it is worked, suffered or enjoyed—in the class struggle as it is fought—unionism had gained actually legal status only in those industries where it was strong enough to enforce this right to organize.

Until the CIO came upon the scene the legal right to organize was at best but a scrap of paper in the big basic industries. This meant that, regardless of what the law of the land did or did not say on paper, the workers in such industries as auto, steel, oil, rubber, radio, and the manufacture of electrical supplies actually were not treated as if unions were legal institutions. The mightiest moguls of industry and finance had even gone so far as to establish a state within a state, a private clumsily concealed but painfully evident government within and above the open government at Washington, in the 48 states and in the municipalities thruout the country. The auto kings, the steel monarchs, the rubber barons, the oil oligarchs, had their own private armies and police, their secret espionage machines, their invisible stranglehold (in addition to their open domination) on the radio, press, schools, church, and food stores of the land.

Fight Against Boss Terrorism

In the fight for giving life to the right to organize, we have a fight against this entire terroristic "super-government" of biggest business which has, for decades, been making life miserable for millions of workers. In this struggle we have a fight to make unions really legal in the giant vital industries of the country—legal not merely in the eyes of the puppets congregated in Washington and collected in the various state assemblies, but legal in the eyes of their masters in the House of Morgan, Rockefeller, Firestone, Chrysler, and their gilded ilk. Here we are experiencing and witnessing a determined effort, a dogged attempt by hundreds of thousands of workers to break the shackles of big capital's government within and above the government, to win a more favorable fighting-ground for their battle against monopoly capitalist ex-

(Continued on Page 6)

Labor's Battle Of The Century

(Continued from Page 4)

exploitation and oppression, and for improved economic conditions. This means a fight for more economic independence. This is a fight for genuine unionism, or unionism completely independent of boss control as against dependent or company unionism.

Furthermore, industrial unionism is the only form, the sole way in which unions can secure effective legality, can attain such genuine legalization in the mass production industries, can build unions independent of boss ownership and control. It is one thing to press a pants manufacturer to the wall and get an agreement out of him; it's quite a different thing to force a Taylor, a Knudsen, a Fairless, a Teagle to the wall. Craft-unionism with its ox-cart tempo and structure suited to smaller scale manufacture could never serve as the vehicle to carry the mighty mass of unskilled and semi-skilled out of the realms of industrial peonage and espionage.

Consequently, we cannot underscore too often and too heavily the fact that the CIO campaign for industrial unionism is a campaign for organizing the many millions in the still non-unionized heavy industries operating on a mass production basis. The CIO drive for industrial unionism is, therefore, not a war to destroy craft unions in industries where they are established agencies functioning effectively in defense of the work-a-day rights and everyday interests of the working men.

Struggle for Status

In the very nature of such a conflict new methods of struggle are born, old ideas of right and wrong are challenged and discarded and new class moral values are enthroned. Some of the employing class publicists have already stopped whining and have begun to do some thinking about this country-shaking onslaught of labor on the citadels of the open shop. For instance, Dorothy Thompson, estimating the campaign to make unions legal in the mass production industries, apparently is the beneficiary of more than one ray of light when she aptly says in the New York Herald Tribune:

"In the great industries of this country the trade union movement is still struggling for mere status. The movement is extremely weak. In the sit-down strike it is using the most effective possible weapon of the weak against the strong ... This is a fight going on, a real fight for the status of something recognized by law but sabotaged by heavy industry in practice...".

This was on January 25th. Much has happened since, but the essential problem remains with us.

Under the banner of the CIO labor has scored spectacular victories, has marked milestone after milestone on the road towards economic and political independence. But we are still in the thick of the fight for actually legalizing unionism in the mass production industries. Though American labor has covered quite some territory on the road to a victorious conclusion of this battle, there is still many a class enemy position to be stormed and much ground to gain before we can say this battle for militant industrial unionism in the decisive economic sectors of the country has been completely won.

How shall we continue this campaign to insure final success? What moves should we make next? What obstacles must we hurdle? What pitfalls must we avoid?

* * *

These questions will be considered in the concluding article of this series in the next issue.

CIO Aids New Jersey Strike

Settlement of New Jersey's first major sit-down strike, involving 1100 out of a total of 1500 cigar and tobacco workers at the plant of I. Lewis Cigar Co., 165 Morrison Ave., Newark, New Jersey, was achieved with a \$2.00 a week raise for all workers. The strikers who are without a Union will continue their sit-down until the settlement agreement is in writing.

The news of the strike spread rapidly, because of the importance attached to its bearing on the recent ukase of Governor Hoffman that he would, if necessary, drown any and all sit-down strikes in New Jersey in blood. In a short time a large crowd of several hundred sympathizers and friends gathered in front of the factory and the infamous Hoffman police put in its appearance with the intention of cowering the strikers. The Police, however, in the face of the determined strikers, beat a strategic retreat and left the workers in full possession of the plant.

The C.I.O. Northern New Jersey Council in the meantime declared: "We want it understood we did not call this strike. The employees asked us for aid and we are going to give it to them. We are going to raise money for food and help them organize a union.

"These employees will be organized and granted a charter in the Cigar Makers' Union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor. These people need organization and we will give them just that."