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## The Miners' Convention

By Wm. Z. Foster

**M**ORE than any other important recent gathering of Organized Labor, the convention of the United Mine Workers of America, held in Indianapolis, Jan. 22-Feb. 2nd, brought into sharp relief the various tendencies now manifesting themselves in the American labor movement. As emphasized by that convention, some of them were: the generally precarious condition of the union as against the employers, the complete intellectual bankruptcy and utter planlessness of the union bureaucracy, the profound discontent of the rank and file at the betrayal and mismanagement of the union, the desperate and unscrupulous efforts of the bureaucrats to maintain themselves in power even if thereby the union be destroyed, the disappearance of the Socialist Party as a factor in the labor movement, and the emergence of the Communists as the real leaders of the revolutionary and progressive forces among the organized workers. Militants will do well to study and take to heart the lessons of the Miners' Convention.

Manifestly the convention was bound to produce a deep and bitter struggle between the reactionary Lewis administration and the progressive forces among the rank and file. The immediate causes were legion. The policies of Lewis have proved a dismal failure. For several years past the union has been gradually slipping in the face of the rapid extension of the non-union territory, the great growth of unemployment, the increase in the militancy and power of the employers, and the ever-greater interference by the Government. This weakening of the union has caused a profound discontent among the coal diggers, which has been enormously increased by Lewis' ruthless repression of all efforts to establish progressive policies in the union, as evidenced by his crimes in Kansas, Nova Scotia, Pennsylvania and elsewhere. A big fight was certain.

### The Battle Begins

Hardly had the convention opened when Lewis started an offense against the progressive forces calculated to disorganize their

ranks and to catch them unprepared. On the second day of the convention he jammed through many of the most important matters that had to be dealt with. Such a course was unprecedented, for the custom has always been to dilly-dally along for several days and then speed up things at the finish. But, realizing the danger of the situation, Lewis seized time by the forelock and quickly cleared away many of the fighting points. This manoeuvre succeeded to some extent, because the militants, despite their best efforts, had not yet fully united themselves.

The first fight began on the report of Vice-President Murray, which bitterly condemned Thomas Myerscough and others connected with the Progressive Miners. A variety of charges were levelled against these militants, ranging from their being "reds" to being agents of the employers. Heavy resistance developed against Murray's report, however, and when the vote was taken it was clearly lost. But Lewis' declared it carried, nevertheless, thus giving the first indication of the arbitrary disregard of democratic procedure which was going to disgrace this convention throughout its sessions.

Following this first victory, Lewis quickly defeated several other progressive measures, with but little effective resistance from the militants. One of these was the demand for the recognition of Soviet Russia. The proposition adopted hypocritically conceded the Russian people the right of self-determination and then demanded that their government, before being recognized, must live up to its "honorable obligations," and also cease propaganda activities in this country. It was purely and simply the plan of Secretary of State Hughes. The once progressive Miners' Union, by such a resolution, becomes not only the defender of capitalism, but also the debt collector of Wall Street. Fast upon the heels of the disgraceful Russian resolution, came another equally bad on the matter of the Labor Party. It started out by endorsing the principle of a labor party and wound up by stabbing it to the heart. The key sentence was, "We realize that the formation of a labor party has passed the visionary stage and can

be made a reality, but in doing so we should not incur the enmity of those of the already well-defined political parties who are our friends." That is, the Labor Party may be admired as an ideal, but the Gompers' policy must be followed as a reality. No affiliation should be had with any party. After thus hamstringing the Labor Party movement in this country, the resolution ironically extended greetings to the British Labor Party for its great victory. Then came a whitewash of the administration for its cold-blooded betrayal of the miners in the Connellsville region in the great strike of 1922. For his treachery in that affair, Lewis was fulsomely praised by the resolution adopted.

The progressives were unable to stop this headlong offensive of Lewis. Many reasons conspired to make them helpless. For one thing they were not yet well organized—all the foregoing propositions having been adopted on the second day of the convention. Then they were demoralized somewhat by their defeat on Murray's report. In addition, it was almost impossible to tell what business was before the house. There were 700 resolutions to be acted upon. These were printed in book form but not distributed to the delegates until the Resolutions Committee actually began to report. This Committee would lump together 30 or 40 resolutions and submit a substitute for them all. The delegates had no copies of these substitutes but had to gather their contents as best they could from the official reading. Often this was purposely garbled so that the delegates could not hear what was actually before the house. All this made it almost impossible to tell what was going on. Moreover, the resolutions were so hypocritically framed that many of the delegates believed they were progressive in character. Finally, Lewis would jam them through, often ignoring a dozen or two delegates on the floor demanding the right to speak.

#### **Nova Scotia Assassinated**

On the crucial second day of the convention, Lewis put across a scathing denunciation of the Nova Scotia miners and an endorsement of his own treason against them. It was one of the most brutal things done in the whole convention. He accused the Nova Scotia miners of having unresistingly taken a 37% cut in wages, of working while the great 1922 strike was on, of repudiating a legitimate contract, and of conducting an unlawful strike. He also accused them of being affiliated with the R. I. L. U., although it is well-known that they withdrew affiliation on Lewis' demand a year ago. After firing this barrage of lies, he rushed the matter to a vote without any debate, ruthlessly denying even the Nova Scotia delegates the right to say a word in their own behalf. This

arbitrary action provoked great discontent among the delegates. The Progressive Miners promptly called a protest meeting of delegates, which was largely attended. The result was such an agitation, that two days later, the machine forces themselves had to reopen the Nova Scotia question. It provoked a full day of bitter debate, but finally the administration carried its point by the use of red hysteria and a flood of lies and misrepresentations.

The Nova Scotia question ended the disastrous second day of the convention, the only relieving feature of which was the adoption of meaningless endorsements of nationalization of mines and railroads, and of plans to organize the unorganized. For the rest of the week the convention simmered along with only an occasional struggle. Industrial unionism was mildly endorsed, likewise the release of political prisoners and the repeal of all anti-syndicalism laws. Both the Amsterdam and Moscow Internationals were condemned, and the question of a general strike in case of war was conveniently referred to the International Miners' Congress. A resolution was pushed through which stated, "We hereby express ourselves as being opposed to any organization which is in sympathy with the Fosterites, regardless of the name under which they may disguise themselves." A revolutionary delegate, Perkovich, was seated after a hard tussle with the machine. The miner delegates to the A. F. of L. Convention in their report made no reference to the expulsion of Wm. F. Dunne.

#### **A Slashing Fight**

It was characteristic of the convention that the fight for the broad political issues, such as the recognition of Soviet Russia, the organization of a labor party, etc., had to be made largely by the revolutionary elements. The rank and file of the delegates did not get much heated up over such questions, nor did they understand them clearly. But when it came to purely trade and union matters, their discontent and rebellion flared high. Especially was this so in the case of the effort on Tuesday of the second week to deprive Lewis of the appointive power. Under the present arrangement he appoints international organizers and other officials. Some 200 of these appointees are in the field. They form a tremendous machine to keep Lewis and his clique in power. A Progressive Miners' resolution proposed to make these officials elective. Lewis fought it bitterly. When the vote was taken by rising, it was so overwhelmingly against the administration report that Lewis dared not call it carried. So machine supporters demanded a roll call and secured it. This took place almost at the close of the session. The Lewis crowd, realizing that the adoption of the Progress-

sive resolution would destroy their machine, at least temporarily, wired all the officials in the surrounding coal fields to come in to help swing the convention. It was said that \$1,000.00 was spent for telegrams for this purpose. Incoming trains were packed with those who responded. When the roll call was completed, the administration announced the result as 2263 for and 2106 against, or a majority of 157 in favor of their proposition. The count of the Progressive Miners showed an administration majority of only 72. This close result proved that the machine proposal was lost, because hundreds of fraudulent votes had been cast by organizers not qualified to vote and by representatives of "blue sky" locals. Immediately the progressives challenged the validity of the roll call and demanded that a committee be appointed to weed out all the illegal votes. But this was arbitrarily ruled out of order.

In this great fight an important part was that the big Illinois delegation, casting about 900 votes, voted 10 to 1 against the administration, notwithstanding that President Farrington voted with Lewis. An interesting feature was the moving of the previous question by Del. Watt of Illinois. When the debate had run on a long while, Watt demanded the floor. Lewis gave it to him, believing that he would deliver a revolutionary speech that might be later used to prejudice the delegates. But Watts cleverly moved the previous question. This amazed Lewis, who cried out loudly that he was denied free speech. He had been holding back waiting to close the debate with one of his usual red-baiting speeches, but Watt beat him to it, to the amusement of the whole convention.

#### **The Steam Roller**

The big fight on the appointive power issue had the double effect of infusing the rebellious rank and file with courage to attack the machine, and of making Lewis proceed to still more desperate means to balk the will of the majority. The next real clash came upon the question of convention representation. As things now stand, a delegate may have as many as five votes. This plays directly and powerfully into the hands of the machine. The plan of the Progressive Miners was to limit each delegate to one vote. The committee reported non-concurrence. But when the *viva voce* vote was taken, the chorus of "No's" completely drowned out the "Yes's." Lewis brazenly called the report adopted, however. Then a division was called for, and about 600 voted for the report and 1200 against it. Lewis following out his desperate plan, declared the report carried. Bitter protests were raised and a roll call was demanded. It required 670 delegates to secure this. About 1000 stood up. But Lewis said

there were only 667, or 3 less than necessary. At this a storm of indignation broke out. It lasted the rest of the session, or from 3 till 5 o'clock. The delegates hissed and stormed and protested. They marched and sang and whistled. The whole floor of the convention was a sea of indignation, while Lewis and his gang held the elevated platform. It was impossible to call the convention to order for the rest of the day, but the machine, not to be outdone, inserted a lot of business in the minutes that was supposed to have been transacted while the turmoil lasted. The incident was a significant manifestation of the seething revolt against the autocracy and corruption of the Lewis administration.

#### **Mr. Davis Speaks**

The convention was undoubtedly the most reactionary held by the miners in 20 years. Its reactionary character was well illustrated in connection with the address delivered by James J. Davis, Secretary of Labor. This faker, in spite of a heavy adverse vote, was invited to speak before the convention. The Progressive Miners thereupon got out a circular condemning him for his activities against foreign-born workers and citing Samuel Gompers in denunciation of Davis. Also the *Daily Worker*, which enjoyed great popularity at the convention and was read by at least half of the delegates, exposed the nefarious Davis. But the latter, by dint of completely misrepresenting his registration of aliens plan, by playing up his trade union record, and with the militant help of the Lewis machine, managed to get by and to have a resolution adopted condemning the circular issued against him. The U. M. W. A. have certainly fallen upon evil days when a man who has been condemned even by the reactionary Gompers can come to their convention and get an indorsement.

#### **The Ku Klux Klan**

Another manifestation of reaction was the stand taken by the administration regarding the Ku Klux Klan. Although the reactionary Portland convention of the A. F. of L. had flatly condemned the hooded order, Lewis and his official cronies lent it aid and comfort. The constitution of the U. M. W. A. provides that no one can be a member of that organization who belongs to the I. W. W., One Big Union, W. I. I. U., or other specified bodies, including the Ku Klux Klan. Inasmuch as the Klan is strong in several mining districts (especially in Indiana where the union headquarters is located) a big demand arose to take it off the blacklist. Many resolutions to that effect were before the convention. Eager to kill two birds with one stone by at once obliging

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and work now with redoubled energy to make the May 30th conference a great representative gathering of revolting workers and farmers.

The leaders of the C. P. P. A. will never lead a real movement for a Farmer-Labor Party. They will not take a single step in that direction, unless they are driven to it by the organized pressure of the rank and file. Those who talk about abandoning the May 30th convention in favor of the July Conference of the C. P. P. A. on the grounds that this will facilitate the forming of a bigger party there, are simply proposing to eliminate from the field the one mighty factor which might compel the July Conference to take decisive action. The real movement for a Farmer-Labor Party comes from below, from the rank and file. At the May 30th Conference this rank and file movement will be united into a compact national body, ready for a national fight

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their friends the Klansmen and by smashing their enemies the "reds," the administration committee proposed that the ban be lifted from the Klan and that a general clause be introduced forbidding membership in all organizations hostile to the American principles of government. If adopted, the latter clause could then be used against the Workers' Party and all other revolutionary bodies. Immediately the committee reported, the progressives fired into its recommendation. And they did this so effectively that the report was overwhelmingly defeated and the constitution left to stand as before. It was such a clean cut victory for the Progressive Miners that not even Lewis, with all his autocratic methods, could rob them of it.

#### Wages, Hours, Agreements

The report of the scale committee brought out the weakness of the Miners' Union and the utter bankruptcy of the ruling bureaucracy. In his report, President Lewis himself indicated the seriousness of the situation when he said: "Notwithstanding the fact that early figures of 1923 production reveal the fact that some 545,000,000 tons of bituminous coal were produced, it is safe to say that the industry worked on an average of not to exceed one-half time. This is a startling situation and indicates that the bituminous industry has investment, man power, development, equipment, and an adequate car supply for approximately 1,000,000,000 tons. Such a situation is unsound from every moral and economic standpoint and constitutes a crying need for adjust-

If all the forces standing for a class party of workers and exploited farmers will throw their strength into the May 30th convention the body thus formed can turn to the July Conference of the C. P. P. A. with the ultimatum: either join forces with us for a farmer-labor ticket or we will go alone.

A successful convention on May 30th at St. Paul is a certain guarantee that a Farmer-Labor Party will be in the field for the 1924 election, either by its independent action or by its pressure upon the July Conference. The failure of the May 30th Convention, or its postponement or abandonment would open the door wide for a colossal betrayal of the whole movement by the double-crossing agents of the capitalist parties who will control the Cleveland Conference. The action of the C. P. P. A. at the St. Louis Conference is not an argument against the May 30th convention but a new argument for it.

ment." What Lewis might have added is that about half of bituminous production comes from non-union mines, which ruins the bargaining power of the U. M. W. A.

To offset this critical situation, Lewis' scale committee proposed nothing but a policy of retreat. This amounted to referring the whole matter of wages and hours to the committee with instructions to get the best agreement possible on the basis of no reduction in wages. Henceforth, the aim shall be to have the contract in the Central Competitive District, which determines conditions in all union fields, run four years instead of one. This was a clear admission of weakness; an effort to secure by long-term agreement what the union it too weak to take by yearly struggles. The Progressives tried to amend the report to include a specific demand for the six hour day, but their amendments were ruled out of order. The report was finally adopted in the face of heavy opposition, and the U. M. W. A. took another long step backward.

#### Howat Betrayed Again

All through the convention, as the resentment against the administration became more openly expressed and better organized, it grew more and more manifest that the supreme struggle between the forces of progress and reaction would come over the case of Alexander Howat. Lewis knew that in this matter he would be confronted with a hostile majority so huge that he could not possibly ignore it and continue the convention. Nor could he club it into submission even with the 150 blackjacks which his supporters were said to have purchased at local stores when the fight grew hot.

All he could do was to clear up all other business and, postponing the Howat case to the very last, adjourn the convention in the face of the turmoil that was bound to ensue upon the announcement of a decision against Howat. So he maneuvered to this end, fencing off all efforts to bring up Howat's case, and completing all other matters.

Finally, when absolutely everything else had been disposed of, the Grievance Committee reported. It had two important matters in hand, the cases of Thomas Myerscough and Alexander Howat. Myerscough's was railroaded quickly by referring it back to the International Executive Board, which means to the graveyard. Then came Howat's. It was handled almost as stupidly. The Grievance Committee simply reported that the matter had been taken care of in previous conventions so was not properly before this one. A roar of indignation went up at this cold-blooded assassination of Howat. Denying Howat the floor, Lewis put the report to a vote. It was lost overwhelmingly, but Lewis declared it adopted. He ignored all demands for a roll call, and in the midst of pandemonium declared the convention adjourned. Thus was added another disgraceful chapter to this famous case, the most shameful in the history of the world's labor movement.

#### To Impeach Lewis

But the Progressive Miners were not caught napping. They had figured out exactly what Lewis would do and were fully prepared for it. During the day they had issued a circular to the delegates warning them not to be stampeded but to keep their seats until Howat had secured a fair count. And as soon as Lewis adjourned the convention, they called it to order again. The great mass of the delegates were still in the hall. Howat addressed them. The assembled body of delegates, who, according to the registration taken, totalled 1187, or a substantial majority of the convention, endorsed his demand for reinstatement. They then adopted a resolution demanding the impeachment of Lewis for violating the constitution on several specific points, both by the autocratic manner he had disregarded the majority in the convention and by his refusal to give Howat a fair trial according to the laws of the union. A resolution was also adopted demanding the immediate nationalization of the mines, the six hour day, and the five day week, immediate unemployment relief from the coal operators, and a delegation to Congress to demand the passage of these laws.

To impeach Lewis will require the calling of a special convention. Five districts are entitled to call one. The aim of the Progressives is to get

five such districts to demand a convention. Thus the Howat case takes a new and still more important turn. It will finally be the undoing of Lewis. All that is necessary is to register the overwhelming rank and file sentiment for Howat. This must eventually happen. Howat will prove to be the Nemesis of Lewis and Lewisism.

#### Significance of the Situation

One of the most important lessons to be drawn from this historic convention is that in the Miners' Union, as in all unions in the American labor movement, the task of leading the progressive forces devolves entirely upon the revolutionaries organized in the Trade Union Educational League and the Progressive Miners' International Committee. Outside of these organized left-wingers there is absolutely no other group that has anything whatever of a progressive character to offer. The time was when the U. M. W. A. was practically a Socialist union, most of its prominent officials being at the same time active members of the Socialist Party. But now the S. P. is as dead as a door nail in the Miners' Union. Not a trace of it as an organization was to be seen at the Indianapolis convention. And practically all of its old-time militants have either sold out to the corrupt machine or have quit the organization in disgust. Thus an unparalleled opportunity for progressive leadership lies before the left-wing. It has no competition whatever in this respect.

Although much has already been done to consolidate the rebellious rank and file miners under the leadership of the left-wing, still the surface has hardly been touched. At the recent convention the revolt was lumbering and blind. On the larger political issues, the revolutionaries lacked the control to swing behind them the masses of delegates. Likewise upon the finer parliamentary manoeuvres these masses could not be made to follow. It was only on the big burning trade issues, when the fight was plain and simple, that they were able to wield even a fraction of their power. In the two years that will ensue before the next convention this condition must be remedied. The revolutionary militants must secure such definite leadership of the masses of miners that they will be able to carry them through the sustained and disciplined fight, both in the convention and elsewhere, necessary to defeat the Lewis machine. This can be done and it will be done. The revolt against Lewisism is at hand. All that is necessary is to organize and direct it. If this is not done promptly and effectively, the Miners' Union will be menaced with destruction.